Guide to Facilitation

Discover - Discuss - Decide, Enabling a Route to Consensus.

In discussion the sharing of information and views trigger recall of relevant details and experiences that are hard to do alone. Having many perspectives available reveals the flaws of arguments that can falsely appear well defined and bring to light missed interpretations. However people are complex, they don't just use words in discussion, they use most of their being, they manage their presence, use cue signals, facial expressions, vary their emotional responses, use humour, aggression, distraction and focus.

As we get to know people better over time, we learn those things about them and how to take them into account. When people know each other well, the strategies and barriers fall away and communication becomes an easier and more relaxing process. When working with people who are unknown to us we don't have time to achieve that. Here I've collated some methods, ideas and insights from a number of years working in many different situations, that all had a need for objective and forward looking focus in a context of bringing together diverse and challenging viewpoints.

Safe area ice-breaking.

A simple way to bring people into a group. They give their first name or how they prefer being referred to. A few safe areas for sharing are added to open a communication process. Safe areas to share are things like, where have you come from, did you have to travel far, how was your journey, how did you hear about this event. Slightly more involving aspects to share are why did you come today, what do you hope to get from this discussion, what points or questions would you like to raise.

Low level ice-breaking can start things and works best with careful reading of the people in the group. The aim is to establish in the group an appreciation of the perspectives whilst avoiding an initial clash of priorities. It is not a suitable way to challenge comfort zones or ask people to open up. In a diverse group you can expect to see early indications from those who are going to go for an open and contributing approach or take a more cautious and at least temporarily closed approach.

Issue led discussion.

The reason a person will have for joining in a discussion will be because the issue being discussed is relevant to them. They have a view on it, and a stake in it. They may have long experience with that issue or it may be a presenting problem in their lives. In a time and space limited setting we have to consider that it is not reasonable or safe to ask people to share personal details of their life. Therefore it is useful to look at safe framing of issues. For example an issue raised in a safe way would be asking how accessible are NHS facilities in people's locality. An unsafe way would be asking people to share their medical conditions, so we can ascertain what facilities are needed. Issue led looks at using the generalisable issues to open further discussion. That may or may not involve more sharing of information, but suitability of the setting and context must be kept in mind. Participants will make use of their personal knowledge, without necessarily sharing it, to steer the discussion. Respecting that people have a reason for the direction they are going, is a key aspect to making it successful.

Self organisation principle.

The people who choose to be part of the discussion are the right people to be part of it. They remain so for as long as they wish, and when they wish they should feel free to leave that discussion and enter another one.

Task focus.

The mobility to move between discussions is enabled by making it easy to enter a discussion because its purpose is clearly stated. A discussion group should note relevant points discussed and at suitable points do a recap of what has been discussed. Pauses in discussion are nothing to be worried about, and when a gap or natural pause occurs. The recorded points can then be used as recaps, to reinforce the task focus, and bring in new arrivals to the discussion.

Productive goal setting.

Productive goal setting works with task focus. It can be used to offer routes away from dead ends, towards useful aims and overcoming negativity about the process. The objective is to take the task, question or issue being discussed and break it down into smaller more achievable steps. It is a group task, that a facilitator can introduce to get a stalling process moving again. When a step is found that can restart a discussion, that should be allowed to lead the process. Productive goal setting doesn't have to become a goal of itself once discussion restarts allow it to resume priority.

Question led discussion.

Nearly all facilitation methods value the identification of a clear purpose for bringing the group together and within that open up creativity and discussion. However many are developed with an assumption of lots of available space, time and facilities. Question led discussion style is no different in objectives, but can be more effective within limits.

It follows good practice guidelines for framing the purpose and issues as questions. The reason for looking at questions rather than issues is that questions can focus thought on problem solving and the answer can be evaluated against the question. This means that once a question is agreed there is an objectively agreed start point and a shared reference for deciding that a conclusion has been reached. This can be either a satisfactory answer has been reached or that no answer can be agreed for that question at this time. This can often be a better foundation for exploring an issue that may well have aspects that are broad, emotive and distracting.

Good questions don't necessarily lead to good answers, but bad questions generally lead to loss of direction, lack of relevance and poor use of time. Good questions achieve focus on the substantive issues and can be productive, particularly within the limitations of available time and space. A question that cannot be addressed in the time available, can be retained with an agreement in principle to pursue a working group approach to that question, and open communication using other channels. Creating a network of interested and willing people should be kept in mind as a positive outcome. Coming up with a good answer is a positive step, but looking forward the next stage is pursuing the means of implementation.

Productive questions.

Can be given fair hearing in the time available.
All can agree when it has been sufficiently explored.
Produces an answer that can be democratically evaluated.
Can be concisely recorded and presented with its answer.

Non rhetorical.
Rhetorical: Isn't it a well known fact that....?
Non Rhetorical: How does this information affect...?

Open.
Closed: Should we create a more free and open society?
Open: What can we do to create a more free and open society?

Encourages discussion.
Discourage: What can people do in the face of insurmountable odds?
Encourage: What can we do together to make our voices heard?

Can lead to an identifiable answer.
Broad: What is the point of politics?
Focused: What are the methods of democratic selection?

Doesn't need to lead to just one answer.
Singular: How can we leaflet a local community?
Multiple: How can we communicate with the people of a local community?

Doesn't exclude the possibility of there being a clear answer.
False premises and limits: Given the failure of democracy, what change can be made to the current electoral system?
Use of comparisons: Which would be preferable, representative, participatory or direct democracy?

Can be understood by all considering it.
Jargon: How can you engage socially stratified demographies in dialectical discourse?
Plain: How can we increase inclusiveness in the wider debate?

Doesn't hide implications and preconditions.
Hidden: How can we accommodate national security concerns to protect our interests?
Presented: What role should national security agencies, MI5, MI6 and NCA play in a transparent, open and accountable democracy?

Forms of Question

Open
How and why type questions that call for a longer more detailed response.
Example: How can a participatory process be implemented?

Closed
Commonly a yes or no type question, but can be used for what and when type questions.

Miscommunication happens when it is used when the desired response is detailed information sharing.
Example: Should we use 'first past the post' electoral selection? Can be responded to as yes or no, but the intent of asking may be to seek alternative suggestions.

Focusing
Focusing questions are for concentrating the process to reach detailed information that might be important for reaching a conclusion.
Example: How is 'first past the post' implemented in British parliamentary elections?

Probing
Probing is different from focusing. Probing questions aim to elicit extra information for communication and understanding purposes.
Example: Why would replacing 'first past the post' lead to fairer elections?

Exploring
Exploring is widening the discussion include new ideas or information.
Example: What other electoral systems are already in use around the world?

Clarifying
Clarification questions clear up misunderstandings and miscommunication.
Example: What do you mean by 'first past the post'?

Challenging
A challenging question places the onus back to the person making the point that is being challenged, it may ask for extra information or ask that a different piece of information be considered for amending a suggestion.
Example: Is it really relevant that we've used 'first past the post' for a great many years?

Leading
Leading questions are questions which suggest their own answer, they are not proper questions but ways of suggesting information, with the only aim being to elicit an agreement from the people it is offered to.
Example: Do you think we need to move beyond thinking that the first past the post system defines what "democracy" is?

Rhetorical
Rhetorical questions are simply a device to offer a point of view in the form of a question. They are not intended to even leave any space for a response and most often used in making speeches, not in discussion.
Example: Are we expected to believe our democratic process is perfectly fine as it is?

Forms of Answer

Direct
An answer that clearly aims to address the question on the basis of the information and arguments shared.

Honest
An answer that is true to the respondents views and beliefs.

Dishonest
An answer that is not true to the respondents views and beliefs but made to hide information or misdirect the discussion.

Partial
A partial answer can be an honest attempt to address a part of the question that is understood, or a dishonest attempt to reinterpret the question.

Misdirection/Avoidance/Changing the topic
This can be offering a disguised answer that is actually not relevant to the question. Answering with a question or using the space given to answer or offer a view to change the topic.

Out of context
Answering using unstated, undeclared or unverifiable information. Answering a deliberate misinterpretation of the question.

Stalling
This can be done to gain time to consider the question but may involve using some of the negative answering forms. Generally a better strategy to be encouraged is for someone to seek clarification.

Refusal
When no reason is given, a statement to provide no view on the question 'I am not answering.'

Surrender
Agree with someone else's answer or view due to feeling pressured or uncomfortable about expressing one's own view or without genuinely accepting the answer or view.

Assent
Agreement with the presented answer, argument, interpretation or conclusion on the basis of the information and arguments given.

Dissent
To withhold assent and register legitimate disagreement with answers, conclusions or interpretations of the information and arguments given.

Simple facilitation guidelines.

Positive assumptions.
Diversity is precious.
Complexity is not to be feared.
Sharing facts and evidence is very valuable.
Sharing opinion honestly helps people see each others point of view and create understanding.

Positive process.
Record key points for recap, clarification and noting agreement.
Reasoning should be shared.
All who wish to speak be given equal opportunity to do so.
Recognition and acknowledgement should be clear and visible.

Good practice.
Repetition with variation of words and perspective is better than simple repetition.
Reasoned arguments for and against, should be premised on facts not opinions.
Interpretations should be premised on facts and reasoned arguments.
Analysis can be useful, but must be fitting to the time, location and people available.

Don't worry.
Disagreement is part of the process.
There is nothing wrong with not knowing.
There is nothing wrong with asking questions.
Pause for thoughts or silences are not a cause for concern.

Bring to conclusion.
Use investigating consensus productively to encourage participation.
Observe for indications of consensus and agreement.
Use a simple democratic process to confirm consensus.
Agree a fall-back position at the start in case no consensus is achievable.

Caveat areas.
Don't try to teach what you cannot in the limits you face.
Complications are created by blockages and conflations.
Argument over opinions can't ever be resolved.
Appeals to emotion can be powerful influencers, but that doesn't mean they are being used fairly.
Manipulation works on the emotional level.
Deceit works on the intellectual level.
Manipulation and deceit go hand in hand.
Distraction can be deliberate or a result of boredom.

Overcoming caveat areas.
Check on those who haven't had enough chance to speak, and make space for them.
Group recall of information contributed and acknowledgement of contributors.
Empathetic language and non-verbal communication.
Clarification of language and definitions.
Remove jargon and buzzwords.
Warmth and humour.
Be human & protect equality, aggressiveness is often a reaction to perceived inequity.
(See task focus and productive goal setting.)

Know the differences between these:
Conjecture - an opinion or conclusion formed on the basis of incomplete information
Supposition - a belief held without proof or certain knowledge.
Assumption - a belief that information is supported without knowing the evidence.
Hypothesis - a proposed explanation.
Thesis - a proposition put forward for discussion.
Sophistry - killing creativity, involvement and inclusion by misusing knowledge of the above.

Assemblies for Democracy