



Hospice Society
OF CAMROSE AND DISTRICT

Support Group Facilitation

Support group facilitation draws upon a broad range of skills, from managing personalities to presenting material. Below are some tools that are helpful to access from the facilitator's toolbox. In no particular order:

1. **Balancing and encouraging:** helpful phrases such as, “who has something to share who has not had a chance yet? Does anyone have a different position/idea?”
2. **Body Language:** model active listening with your body and face; stay focused on the speaker.
3. **Sensitivity to the Feelings of Individuals:** Creating and maintaining an atmosphere of trust and respect requires an awareness of how people are responding to both the topics under discussion and the opinions and reactions of others. Most people will not articulate their discomfort, hurt feelings, or even anger; instead they silently withdraw from the discussion and often from the group. Sensing how people are feeling and understanding how to respond to a particular situation is a critical skill of facilitation.
4. **Flexibility:** embrace the teachable moments as they spontaneously arise.
5. **Group-generated and facilitator-suggested rules:** allow the group to own their process. The following rules of group conduct may be incorporated:
 - a. Confidentiality
 - b. Commitment to turn up
 - c. Share thoughts/feelings, create space for others to share
 - d. Accept and give encouragement
 - e. Accept similarities and differences
6. **Intentional Silence:** never underestimate the value and power of silence. Don't rush to fill dead-air. It is useful when no one is responding, as a way to create space, to allow a quiet person to fully express themselves, or to allow a person to reflect on what was shared.
7. **Active Listening**
 - a. **Paraphrasing:** affirming what has been shared, bringing clarity for the sake of others in the group.
 - b. **Positive reinforcement:** Acknowledge ideas and avoid making judgments of ideas or opinions.
 - c. **Mirroring:** with mirroring you're keeping your tone warm and accepting and you're using the speaker's words, not yours.
 - d. **Tracking:** when you're keeping track of various lines of thought that are going on simultaneously within a single discussion—helping to summarize the different perspectives and show that multiple ideas are equally valid.

- 8. Tact:** Sometimes the facilitator must take uncomfortable actions or say awkward things for the good of the group. The ability to do so carefully and diplomatically is critical. Examples of this include: a group discussion dominated by one person; or a group of silent participants. The facilitator, using gentle tact, will find a way to engage the team so everyone can participate and get the most out of the session. Often times a participant may ask a question, then ramble on to eventually answer their own question. A capable facilitator knows how to diffuse these awkward moments and maintain a productive atmosphere.
- a. Alert the group on the first gathering that a part of your roll is to keep conversation on topic, and to allow all participants opportunity to share. If somebody is sharing a long off-topic story you may need to interrupt and redirect.**
 - b. If a participant dominates (on or off topic) you may need to gently interrupt to give others opportunity to share.
9. **Relevance:** Make sure the group is clear on why a topic or sub-topic relates to the goals of the group
10. **Throw Back to the group:** invite the group to answer a participant's questions; create space for the group to share its wisdom.
11. **Know who's in the Room:** Find out as much as you can about who will be in the room before you get there. The more you know about the group, the individual personalities and the dynamics at play, the better you'll be able to plan for a successful session and a positive experience.
12. **Create an Inclusive Environment:** When planning your session and while you're in the room facilitating, you need to find ways for the entire group to be on an equal playing field. Finding ways for everyone in the group to participate is a key component to getting the group to buy-in and own the process; inclusivity is the name of the game.
13. **Give Clear Instructions:** Clear instructions make it easier for your group to get to the outcome you're looking for. Some easy ways to do that include having the directions pre-written on flip chart paper or a PowerPoint slide and asking the group to repeat the steps back to you to make sure everyone understands the activity.
14. **Manage Time Like a Referee:** Group activities have time limits—there are only so many hours in a session. That means you'll need to plan out how long the different components of your session will take and how long your group will have to reach the session's goals. There are a few different ways to keep track of time: use a watch or phone and let people know how much time is passing, use a large clock that the whole group can see, or delegate timekeeping to individuals or smaller breakout groups.

Choose a method that will let you pay attention to what's going on in the room and allow your group to easily track the time for each task. Whatever method you choose, consider giving people warnings as the time for each activity draws to a close. You can say it out loud or hold up a sign ("2 minutes left" or "1 minute left," for example) so you don't need to interrupt the group's work flow or conversation.

15. **Gauge Energy:** sometimes a group of people walk into a room and convey an energy—maybe it's tired, lethargic, excited, hyper, silly, negative, shy, nervous—whatever! Sometimes you need to match the activity you have in mind with the energy of the group and sometimes you need to find ways to boost a low-energy group's enthusiasm and excitement.

It can be helpful to have a few energizer activities on hand that get people moving, bring energy up, focus the group, lighten the mood, and get people thinking creatively. No one does their best work when they're feeling low or tired and a few fun activities can go a long way toward bumping the mood of the room up to a fun, productive level.

16. **Be Flexible; Adapt on the Fly:** Part of your job as a facilitator involves checking in with your group on progress and process. Think about how often they might need a break. Make a point to periodically ask how everyone is doing and whether it's time for a break. Maybe you originally planned on taking a break in 30 minutes, but the group needs it now—so give it to them! It's about taking care of your group to help them operate at their best.

You'll also need to think about your agenda and whether you're on track to accomplish everything you planned. If you're off track, call it out—chances are they know already! "As you know, it took us longer to discuss X than we thought and now we only have 1 hour left in our meeting." Now it's time to show some flexibility—ask what the group thinks is the best way to spend the remaining time and change your agenda accordingly.

17. **A sense of humor:** As in most human endeavors, even the most serious, a facilitator's appreciation of life's ironies, ability to laugh at themselves, and to share the laughter of others enhances the experience for everyone.

18. **Make Introductions:** There are lots of ways for people to introduce themselves to each other that are better than just going around the room. The kinds of introductions you do should depend on what kind of meeting you are having, the number of people, the overall goals of the meeting, and what kind of information it would be useful to know.

19. **Don't Talk to The Newsprint, Blackboard or Walls – They Can't Talk Back:** Always wait until you have stopped writing and are facing the group to talk.

20. **Respond to criticism mindfully:** Avoid a defensive reaction. If you are attacked or criticized, take a "mental step" backwards and then respond. Once you become defensive, you risk losing the group's respect and trust, and might cause folks to feel they can't be honest with you.

The points above are compiled from the following resources:

Mike Gospe, <https://www.kickstartall.com/9-characteristics-of-a-good-facilitator>

Marya Axner, ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/group-facilitation/facilitation-skills/main.

Hannah Feldberg-Dubin, <https://www.thedesigngym.com/top-11-skills-effective-facilitator/>