

Tips on How To Lead Group Discussions

CLS Module

Discussions can be a creative and productive way to develop a shared understanding of a subject within a group and to explore a subject in some depth. Discussions are a critical precursor to a group developing a consensus decision where that is a goal. The reasons for having group discussions in a meeting are several:

- ☞☞ Help participants get interested and involved in a subject.
- ☞☞ Enable participants to fill in information gaps and to clear up misunderstandings.
- ☞☞ Enable participants to review and analyze subject matter that has been presented to the group verbally or in writing.
- ☞☞ Identify areas of agreement and disagreement in the group so that differences can be understood and resolved.

How To Prepare For A Group Discussion

Think through what your objectives are for a group discussion in advance of the session, and decide the key outcomes you would like to see the discussion produce. With your objectives in mind, develop and write down two or three open-ended questions to help start and guide the discussion. Plan to begin with a very general, open-ended question (one that cannot be answered by, "yes", or, "no"), and follow with more targeted open-ended questions.

First ask: "What do you think of this approach?"

Then ask: "What do you consider the most valuable aspects of it? What are the most challenging?"

Then ask: "If the team were to recommend this approach, how do you think local program people can be convinced of its utility?"

How To Start A Group Discussion

Introduce the discussion topic and objective(s), and pose the first, general, open-ended question. For example, if you are conducting a group discussion on a proposal to train State teams in surveying techniques:

"Let's take the next 15 minutes or so to discuss the proposal on training State teams. Let's start with the question, "What do you think of this idea?"

Be ready to wait for the first response and be patient. Try counting to 15 silently. It often takes time for the first person to organize a thought and decide to express it. If no one comments, try the question in a new way.

"Any thoughts on the idea to provide State teams with training on surveying techniques? Anything you want clarified?", or

"Anything you particularly like about this proposal?
Don't like about it?"

Once the first person speaks up, others will generally follow without delay. When comments begin, treat each one with respect. To speak up in a group session involves at least a little bit of risk for participants. If they feel you may dismiss or criticize their comments, they may prefer not to speak up at all.

How To Encourage Continued Discussion

The first rule for facilitators is to listen carefully to each comment. Restate or paraphrase comments from time to time to show participants that you are listening and subtly reaffirm the value of participants' points. It is very important that the facilitator not evaluate comments either positively or negatively; rather you should acknowledge them supportively, but neutrally. Definitely DO NOT criticize participants or cast their comments in a negative light.

Do say: "I see what you are saying--it will take a lot of resources."
"So, you found that the last training from that contractor was very valuable."

Don't say: "That doesn't sound like a very fair evaluation of the Commissioner's comments."

"You're probably the only person who would look at this subject that way."

The facilitator also has a role in reinforcing the group's efforts in the discussion, saying, for example:

"This discussion has brought up some interesting points; I can see that there are a lot of opinions about State teams' role in conducting surveys in this group. Does anyone else have a comment?"

"This topic has proven more complex than it appeared to be; your discussion raises a number of issues about system building. Are there any more ideas?"

It is helpful to the participants for the facilitator to restate the initial topic of the discussion from time to time to help them stay on track, especially if a sub-point or related but different topic has absorbed the group's attention for several minutes.

How To Record The Discussion

Write participants' comments on flipcharts. This will encourage further comments, allow you to be sure all comments are considered, and allow participants to review or summarize the discussion as needed. Be sure to:

✍️✍️ Write their actual words (not every word--just key words); do NOT change their comments to make a particular point. It's better to introduce your own thoughts directly if needed, rather than change participants' thoughts.

✍️✍️ Write down all comments, even those that are not exactly on the subject. If comments seem very unrelated to the subject, you may want to start another page titled "Ideas to Discuss Later". Just be sure to return to the list at a later point.

✍️✍️ Write down any action items for follow-up that may come out of a discussion. Start a separate flipchart that can be added to throughout the meeting and reviewed at the end to be sure no follow-up assignments fall between the cracks.

How To Get Lots Of Participants Into The Discussion

Your goal is to ensure that everyone has a chance to participate to enable the group to have the benefit of everyone's thinking and to help the group form a common view of a subject. It is not important that everyone speak up a certain number of times or that all participants contribute at the same rate. Some people naturally talk more, others less. It is desirable for most participants to join in a discussion for it to be of greatest interest and value to the group, but it is most important that everyone knows that he or she can contribute at any point they choose to.

How To Engage Quiet Participants

Welcome comments from quiet participants, but don't call on people by name or be too insistent:

Do ask: "Does anyone who hasn't spoken up yet have any thoughts on this?"

Don't say: "What do you have to say, Anna?"

Respond to quiet participants' unspoken, but apparent concerns (a quizzical look, a furrowed brow), but don't try to interpret them. Invite questions or comments in a general way:

Do ask: "It looks like there might be a few questions or comments...."

Don't say: "You look confused, Ed."

How To Get The Views Of The Whole Group

If you wish to elicit the views of all participants on a topic, you can poll the group, and ask each person to respond briefly. When you poll the group, give people the option to pass and not speak; it's best not to force participants to speak, but rather say something like:

"Will each person please give us your thoughts about the issue of the Federal level's role in helping States build their STW systems? Those who don't have a comment at this time may just say, "pass".

How To Handle Problem Behavior Constructively

Your goal is to ensure that the behavior of some people does not reduce the value of the discussion to the whole group. Often "problem" behavior can be avoided if you establish clear ground rules and ensure that everyone has a chance to participate. If that is not enough, try these techniques:

How To Respond To Challenges

Don't over-react, just acknowledge the points the participant makes. If possible, find merit in what he or she has said, agree with what you can, then move on.

How To Respond To Unanswerable Questions Or Unresolvable Concerns

If a participant asks you a question you cannot answer, check to be sure you understood the point, and if you don't know the answer say so openly and see if any others in the room know the answer or offer to get it:

"I don't know the answer to that question, Grace. I'll check on it this evening and give you the answer tomorrow."

If a participant expresses a concern or argument you cannot resolve to his or her satisfaction, ask if someone else in the participant group would like to give it a try. If no one can persuade or reassure the participant adequately, acknowledge the concern, write it on a flipchart if it seems significant, and move on.

"Let's continue with the agenda, Bryan, and if you are still concerned by the time we get to the planning step, we'll revisit your issue then."

"I appreciate your concern, Jim, but we need to go on with the meeting. If you'd like, you and I can talk about this issue some more after the close of the session today."

How To Handle Side Conversations

Do not cause embarrassment to the participants. The best tack is to talk with persistently disruptive people during a break. If you feel you need to do something during the meeting, do it gently, for example, you might try:

Option 1:

If only two people are engaged in a side conversation, you can glance at them, or if that doesn't help, walk toward them (without changing your own behavior--continue making your points or facilitating the discussion); once you get their attention they will usually stop talking on their own.

Option 2:

If two or more side conversations start up, you can refer the group as a whole to the ground rules (assuming you have a germane one), or if no ground rule looks appropriate, you can say something like:

"We need to have just one conversation at a time!"

If the group does not have a ground rule you can use to reduce side conversations, for example one addressing side conversations or one on the importance of listening, you might suggest that the group add one. If your relationship with the group is a close one, this situation can sometimes be dealt with humor.

How To Respond To People Making The Same Point Repeatedly

If a participant brings the same point up over and over, acknowledge it the second time (Yes, I heard you say that...), paraphrase it the next time (It sounds like you are saying you're very concerned about the Legislature's hearings...), and write it down on a flipchart if it's brought up again. If the participant still persists, which would be very unlikely, offer to talk with him or her about it at the next break.

How To Handle Non-Relevant Comments

Sometimes a participant makes a comment that does not appear to be on topic, or that introduces a side track you'd rather not have the group pursue. If that happens, wait for the point to be made, acknowledge it, write it on the flipchart if you are recording other ideas, integrate it if possible, and restate the intended subject of the discussion before you ask for the next comment from the group.

How To Handle A Person Who Makes Too Many Comments

If one participant seems to speak up too often for others to have a chance to talk, look around for others who want to talk and call on them for a while. If needed, give the too-talkative participant a special job, that will give him or her another way to contribute to the session. For example, you can ask a participant to make a brief presentation on an area of his or her special experience with the subject, or ask him or her to assist you by recording others' comments on the flipchart.

How To Extract Key Points From A Group Discussion

For participants to get the most from group discussions, they need a chance to sort out the key points from the various thoughts that may be brought out. A quick way to do that and not over-control the discussion or interrupt its flow is to summarize key points from time to time and at the end of the discussion using either of the following techniques.

Option 1:

Get Participants To Identify Key Points--Ask the participants to summarize what points stand out to them from the discussion by posing such questions as:

"What key points have emerged so far in this discussion?"

"What are ideas you will take away from this discussion?"

"What should we conclude from this discussion?"

Option 2:

Identify Key Points Yourself--You may wish to suggest additional summary points to those made by participants, or at times, summarize the discussion yourself to ensure that certain points are highlighted. Be sure when you do that you restate the key points as the participants stated them. Refer back to the flipcharts for the right language if you have recorded discussion points. It is important not to mischaracterize participants' comments. Check with the group to be sure you have captured their main ideas accurately and completely.