

Roots of Change program

SOME GUIDELINES FOR FACILITATORS*

Study group coordinators will not only organise the first meeting, but will likely also help facilitate the other initial meetings. Some groups may wish to have the role of facilitator rotate amongst all or several members of the group. Other groups may wish to keep a single, ongoing facilitator. Whoever facilitates will need to take the lead in stimulating and moderating the discussion by asking questions, identifying key points, and generally assisting the group process. While doing all this, the facilitator must be friendly, understanding, and supportive. The group may want to experiment with some innovative techniques designed to facilitate open and respectful learning spaces.

The facilitator does not need to be an 'expert'. However, he/she should be well-prepared. This means being familiar with the reading material for the meeting, and being aware of the direction in which the discussion might go. She/he should also be aware of the personalities in the group, and have a clear understanding of the group's goals.

The most difficult aspects of facilitating discussion groups include keeping the discussion focused, working with more aggressive participants, and keeping one's own ego at bay in order to listen to and truly hear other participants. The following suggestions and principles of group leadership will be useful even for experienced facilitators.

Beginning

- 'Beginning is half,' says an old Chinese proverb. Set a friendly and relaxed atmosphere from the start. The goals of the study group should be discussed and perhaps modified in the first session, as should the ground rules for discussion. It is important that participants know what is to be expected and feel comfortable within that framework right from the beginning.

- You might want to start each session with a brief review of the readings. This is best done by the participants and will refresh the memories of those who read the session's material--and include those who did not. Recapitulation of the main points will also provide a framework for the discussion.

Managing the Discussion

- Try to keep the discussion focused on the session's topic. Straying too far could cause each session to lose its unique value. A delicate balance is best: since all the topics in these readings are interrelated, don't force the group to stick to the topic too rigidly, but don't allow the discussion to drift aimlessly. Be sure to allow people to share their emotional responses as well, as this will help empower the group far more than suppression.

- Moderating domineering participants is one of the most difficult aspects of leading a discussion. To allow the aggressive, talkative person to dominate is a sure recipe for failure. Don't let people call out and gain control of the floor. If you allow this to happen, the aggressive will dominate and the more polite people will become angry and frustrated.

- Draw out quiet participants. Do not allow anyone to be forgotten by the group. Try to create opportunities for each participant to contribute. As time goes by and you get to know more about each person in the group, this will become easier.

- Be an active listener. You will need to truly hear and understand what people say if you are to guide the discussion effectively. Listening carefully will set a good example for participants and will alert you to potential conflicts.
- Use conflict productively and try to help participants avoid personalising their disagreements. Do not avoid conflict, but try to keep it narrowly focused on the issue at hand. Since everyone's opinion is important in a study group, participants should feel comfortable saying what they really think--even if it's unpopular.
- Be cautious about the using the power the group may hand you--whether you seek it or not. Be aware that as the facilitator, what you say will often be given more weight than what others say. Don't allow the group to make you the expert, the 'answer person', or the final arbiter. You might consider approaching your role as facilitator according to the Zapatista idea of 'leading by obeying'. That is, facilitating meetings according to the structures, processes and general will of the entire group that has empowered you with that role.
- Don't be afraid of pauses and silences. People need time to think and reflect. Sometimes silence will help someone build up the courage to make a valuable point. Facilitators who tend to be impatient may find it helpful to count silently to 10 after asking a question.
- Don't always be the one to respond to comments and questions. Encourage interaction among the group. Participants should be conversing with each other, not just with the facilitator.
- Synthesise or summarise the discussion occasionally. It is helpful to consolidate related ideas to provide a solid base for the discussion to build upon. You can invite others to do this as well.
- If you find yourself in a situation that you don't know how to handle, ask the other members for their help.

Using Questions Effectively

- Ask hard questions. Don't allow the discussion to simply confirm old assumptions. Avoid following any 'line', and encourage participants to re-examine their assumptions. Try to call attention to points that have not been mentioned or seriously considered, whether you agree with them or not.
- Utilise open-ended questions. Questions such as, 'What other possibilities have we not yet considered?' do not lend themselves to short specific answers and are especially helpful for drawing out quiet members of the group.

Concluding

- Don't worry about attaining consensus. It is good for the study group to have a sense of where participants stand, but it is not necessary to achieve consensus at every meeting. In some cases a group will be split, and there is no need to hammer out agreement.
- Close each session with a brief summing-up. Ask participants for feedback on the session and its help in moving the group towards its goals.
- We have compiled a selection of inspiring quotes, poems and parable on themes such as working through despair, hope, expanding boundaries, and personal/ social transformation. We call this the 'Hope Trove,' and strongly recommend ending each session by reading one or two of these out loud.

*(Adapted from materials developed by Study Circles Resources Center, Pomfret, CT.)