
GUIDE TO FACILITATING DIALOGUES



Dialogue facilitators do not need to be experts on the topic being discussed. Good facilitators help establish a safe environment where participants can discuss complex and often emotionally-charged issues. Facilitators also help participants understand that the dialogue is a learning experience and not a forum for participants to voice their opinions without listening to others’.

Dialogues are:

- Rooted in democratic discussion, not debate or argument
- Allow participants to hear, share and consider different perspectives and personal experiences
- An opportunity to discover areas of common concern

Dialogue facilitators should:

- Remain impartial.
- Keep discussion focused.
- Deepen the level of sharing with probing questions.
- Consider a variety of viewpoints.
- Clarify and summarize key points.
- Create opportunities for everyone to participate.

Dialogue participants should:

- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- Withhold judgements. When in doubt, ask.
- Honor and share “airtime.”
- Be respectful of self and others.
- Listen actively and intentionally.
- Speak from personal experience using “I” statements.
- Refrain from speaking for others.
- Ask “genuine questions” for understanding.
- Respect confidentiality.
- Maintain an open mind about the process and content.

EIGHT TIPS FOR BEING A GREAT FACILITATOR

1. Be a good listener.

Types of listening

Appreciative listening	listening for pleasure or enjoyment
Empathic listening	listening to provide emotional support for the speaker
Comprehensive listening	listening to understand the message of a speaker
Critical listening	listening to evaluate a message for purposes of accepting or rejecting it

How to become a better listener

- Take listening seriously.
- Resist distractions.
- Refrain from speaking for others.
- Don't be diverted by appearance or delivery.
- Focus your listening; listen for main points.
- Develop note-taking skills.
- Suspend judgement.

2. Stay Impartial!

The most important thing to remember is that, as a facilitator, you should not share your personal views or try to push your own agenda on the issue. You are there to serve the discussion, not to join it.

3. Set a relaxed and open tone.

Welcome everyone and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.

Well-placed humor is usually appreciated.

At the beginning of the dialogue, remind everyone that the purpose of the dialogue is to work with one another to look at the issue at hand. Also, remind them that your role as facilitator is to remain neutral, keep the discussion focused, and guide the conversation according to the philosophy.

Start with the ground rules for participants, and then ask participants to add their own ideas.

Ground rules might include:

- Keep an open mind.
- Assume the best intentions.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- Disagree respectfully.
- Contribute to the conversation and make space for others.
- The Vegas Rule (what happens in the dialogue stays in the dialogue).
- Take care of yourself and take care of the group.

4. Create a safe space for all participants

Acknowledge the hopes and fears that everyone brings to the table. People will make mistakes during the course of the discussion and that's okay.

While you want to remain impartial, it is also important to create a safe space for all participants. Interrupt expressions of prejudice but don't attack the person making them.

Strategies include:

- Asking for more information:
“What led you to believe this about _____?”
- Paraphrasing the feelings you hear expressed:
“I hear you saying _____?”
- Challenging stereotypes by asking for counter-examples:
“Does anyone have an experience or know of an example that differs from what was just said?”

For more strategies, see *Speak Up!: Identifying and Confronting Bias and Prejudice* at diversity.missouri.edu/education.

5. Stay aware of and assist the group process.

- Always use your “third eye.” You are not only helping to keep the group focused on the content of the discussion, but you will be keeping track of how the participants are communicating with each other—who has spoken, who hasn’t spoken, and whose point hasn’t yet received a fair hearing.
- Try not to interfere with the discussion unless you have to. Don’t allow the group to turn to you for the answers.
- Resist the urge to speak after each comment or answer every question. Allow participants to respond directly to each other. The most effective leaders often say little, but are constantly thinking about how to move the discussion forward.
- Once in a while, ask participants to sum up the most important points that have come out in the discussion.
- Don’t be afraid of silence! People sometimes need time to think before they respond. If silence feels awkward to you, try counting silently to 10 before you rephrase the question. This will give people time to collect their thoughts.
- Don’t let anyone take over the conversation; try to involve everyone.
- Remember that a discussion is not a debate, but a group dialogue. If participants forget this, don’t hesitate to ask the group to help re-establish the philosophy.
- Keep track of time!

6. Help the group look at various points of view.

- Make it clear to participants that you will never take sides on the issue; your role as facilitator is to be fair and act neutral.
- Ask participants to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs.
- Don’t allow the group to focus on just one particular personal experience or anecdote
- Help participants to identify common ground, but don’t try to force agreement.

7. Ask open-ended questions that don’t lend themselves to easy answers.

Open-ended questions are questions that can’t be answered with a quick “yes or no”. They push people to think about why they believe what they do. Open-ended questions also encourage people to look for connections between different ideas.

Get familiar with the following questions. They are a great resource during any dialogue.

General questions:

- Do you agree with that? Why?
- What do other people think of this idea?
- What would be a strong case against what you just said?
- Have you had any experiences with this that you can share with the group?
- Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?
- What do you think is really going on here? Why is that important?
- How might others see this issue?
- Do you think others in the group see this the way you do? Why?
- How does this make you feel?

Questions to use when there is a disagreement:

- What do you think he/she is saying?
- What bothers you most about this?
- What is at the heart of the disagreement?
- How does this make you feel?
- What experiences or beliefs might lead a reasonable person to support that point of view?
- What do you think is really important to people who hold that opinion?
- What don't you agree with?
- What do you find most convincing about that point of view?
- What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?
- Could you say more about what you think?
- What makes this so hard?
- What have we missed that we need to talk about?

Questions to use when people are feeling hopeless:

- Say a little about how that makes you feel.
- What do you see that gives you hope?
- Can the problems that you are talking about be solved in any way? How?

Closing questions:

- What are the key points of agreement and disagreement about today's dialogue?
- What have you heard today that has made you think, or has touched you in some way?

8. Be aware of the dynamics of cross-cultural communication

- Help people appreciate and respect each other's communication styles. Some cultures value listening more than speaking. In others, taking a stand is most important. Help participants to realize that there is more than one good way to communicate. Your leadership should show that each person has an important and unique contribution to make to the dialogue.
- Help participants understand that cultural labels, or stereotypes, are usually unfair.
- Remind the group, if necessary, that no one can represent his or her entire culture. Each person's experiences, as an individual and as a member of a group, are unique and OK.
- Be sure not to equate the experiences. To support participants who tell how they have been mistreated, be sure to explain that you respect their feelings and are trying to help all the members of the group understand. Remind people that no one can know exactly what it feels like to be in another person's shoes.
- Sensitivity, empathy, and familiarity with people of different backgrounds are important qualities for the facilitator. If you have not had the opportunity to spend time with all kinds of people, get involved in campus or community programs that can help broaden your understanding of cross-cultural dynamics.

For further study

Do you want to learn more about facilitating complex conversations? Consider adding these books to your reading list:

Landis, Kay (2008). *Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education*. University of Alaska Anchorage, Alaska Pacific University.

Nash, Robert J and Chickering, Arthur W. (2008). *How to Talk about Hot Topics on Campus: From Polarization to Moral Conversation*. Jossey-Bass.

Sue, Derald Wing (2015). *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race*. Wiley.

Cullen, Maura (2008). *35 Dumb Things Well-Intended People Say: Surprising Things We Say That Widen The Diversity Gap*. Morgan James Publishing.