2 - FACILITATE THE PARTNERSHIP PROCESS

Group facilitation is the art of helping a group of often diverse people identify common ground, build consensus, and come together to achieve their goals and objectives. Having a trusted facilitator is one of the keys to a successful partnership, and a facilitator's role often involves helping to bring different stakeholders to the table.

It is a group of equals, but in any group you have somebody that wants to dominate the conversation and that can be a problem. You need a good moderator, that's for sure, in any of these group discussions. – Masonry Partner

This section focuses on the role of the facilitator, includes information and tips on effective meeting facilitation, and offers advice for facilitating the first partnership meeting.

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2.1 DETERMINE THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

Research and experience have shown that a facilitator plays a critical role in a partnership's success. It is important at the start of a partnership to set clear expectations for the facilitator's role. If some partners expect the facilitator to provide direction and answer questions, while others expect the facilitator to nurture the process and allow the partnership to explore content, there could be contention about the effectiveness of the facilitator.

What is the difference between a facilitator, a leader, and a facilitative leader?

The distinction between a facilitator and a leader can be blurry. In its purest form, facilitation involves remaining completely impartial from the partnership process and decision-making. In this case, a **facilitator's** job is to help ensure that all partners have a voice and partnership activities move along smoothly, while allowing the group to take the lead in making decisions and dictating partner responsibilities. In this facilitation model, the facilitator and the leader are different people.

The **leader**, if there is one, is a highly influential member of the partnership who helps to spearhead group efforts and guide decision-making using his/her knowledge and ability to provide direction.

A blended model of facilitation occurs when the facilitator and leader roles are intertwined – in other words, when there is a **facilitative leader.** This type of facilitator has expertise in both the content and facilitation skills, as well as the added benefit of understanding dynamics between partners and partner organizations. A person acting as a facilitative leader must be careful to balance their personal input and biases with those of the other partners to ensure that they do not overly influence decisions and the direction of the partnership.

A few potential pitfalls of facilitative leadership to avoid:

- Harboring bias, or being perceived as biased because of ties to a partner organization
- "Leading" conversations instead of allowing new ideas to happen naturally
- Highlighting some perspectives more than others

Tool 2-A can be used in two ways: 1) to assess whether you are acting as a facilitator or facilitative leader, and 2) to clarify the partnership's expectations for the facilitator's role.

TOOL 2-A: FACILITATOR OR A FACILITATIVE LEADER – WHICH ONE ARE YOU?

Instructions:

1. Assess your role as the facilitator. Use the categories in the following table to determine which most closely reflects your role as a facilitator.

2. Assess the partnership's perceptions and expectations. Once you have done your own assessment, ask the rest of partnership to select the categories that reflect their perception of the facilitator's role.

3. Compare the results to your assessment, and if there are differences, use it as an opportunity to clarify your role as the facilitator.

Characteristics	Facilitator	Facilitative Leader
Group Membership	Third Party	Leader of Group
Involvement in Substantive Issues	Substantively Neutral	Deeply Involved
Use of Expertise	Process Expert	Content and Process Expert
Decision-Making Authority	No	Yes

[Adapted from *The Role of the Facilitator*, http://www.virginia.edu/processsimplification/resources/Facilitator.pdf.]

2.2 EXPLORE PARTNER PERCEPTIONS

Successful facilitation requires understanding partners' perceptions of each other in order to create an environment of trust and confidence, as well as to effectively establish group norms, expectations, and collective responsibility.

Partners may have preconceived notions about other partners or the industry segments they represent, possibly based on previous experiences. It is best to identify those preconceptions early in the process to avoid problems later.

> *It takes a long time and you have to develop a level of trust between the two parties. The labor side has to understand that management looks at them as a very important resource and a part of the industry. And management has to understand that labor wants to work with us and they want to make things more successful to create more job opportunities for people they represent. It can be a win-win situation if you approach it the right way.*
> *– Masonry Partner*

The following exercise is designed to help facilitators and partnerships recognize these perspectives, set expectations, and get ahead of conflict. The results of this exercise may be useful when developing a partnership agreement (see **Section 3.5: Create a Partnership Agreement**).

TOOL 2-B: PARTNER DIVERSITY, EXPECTATIONS, AND CHALLENGES

Instructions:

1. Divide into groups by stakeholder organization or type of organization. If there is only one representative from a particular organization or sector, group him or her with a like-minded partner. If your group is not large enough to divide up, this exercise can be done with the group as a whole, but you will have to make sure that everyone feels comfortable. The idea is to create a friendly "safe space" to discuss concerns and hopes.

2. Provide each partner group with flip chart paper or whiteboard space. Each group will start by listing the things on flip chart paper that they hope each of the other partner groups will contribute to the partnership's work. Group members should consider what they believe are the other groups' skills, knowledge, backgrounds, and resources. If this is done as a whole, for each constituency represented (labor, management, etc.), ask the partners not in that constituency to respond. For example: put "Labor" on the flip chart and ask those who are not representing workers what they believe are the skills, etc. that the labor representative(s) and their respective organization(s) bring to the partnership.

3. Next, the groups will list on a separate sheet of flip chart paper the things they believe will be challenges in working with each of the other groups.

4. Bring the groups back together and ask each one to share their lists. Remind everyone that at this point, they can ask for clarification of the items on a group's list but they cannot challenge or debate an item.

5. Each partner group will be asked to think about the contributions and challenges that the other partners thought they would bring to the table and come to the next meeting prepared to discuss: a) strategies they can use to increase the likelihood that their own group can offer the contributions listed; and b) decrease the likelihood that they present the challenges listed.

6. At the next meeting, all partner groups will present their strategies and the whole partnership will consider how to incorporate them into the work of the partnership and into any agreements the group develops.

[Adapted from "Strategies and Techniques for Effective Group Process in CBPR Partnerships," (2012) Becker, Israel, & Allen. *Methods in Community-Based Participatory Research for Health. (2nd ed.)*.]

2.3 USE FACILITATION STRATEGIES

While the role of the facilitator may seem simple on paper – get the work done while supporting and building the partnership – in reality it is often dynamic and challenging.

At the "action" level, a facilitator's job might include sharing information, managing time, clarifying concepts and goals, summarizing what has been accomplished, assisting with group process and decision-making, assigning tasks, outlining next steps, and building momentum. At the "interpersonal" level, it requires pulling together individuals who may have unequal organizational power and different agendas, motivations, experiences, and histories into a cohesive group that is willing to honor and respect disagreement while working together toward their common vision.

What makes a good facilitator?

A good facilitator balances getting the work done with supporting individuals and strengthening the partnership, is perceived as unbiased, and is trusted by the partners.

Characteristics of an Effective Facilitator:

- "Asks" rather than "tells"
- Keeps things on task, but also spends time building relationships
- Initiates conversation rather than waiting for someone else to
- Asks for others' opinions rather than always offering their own
- Negotiates rather than dictates decision-making
- Listens without interrupting
- Emotes but is restrained when the situation requires it
- Bases decisions upon intuitions as well as facts
- Has sufficient self-confidence that they can look someone in the eye when talking to them
- Persuasive and engaging
- Enthusiastic
- More outgoing than serious
- More like a counselor than a sergeant
- Can keep the big picture in mind while working on the nitty-gritty

[Adapted from *The Role of the Facilitator*, http://www.virginia.edu/processsimplification/resources/Facilitator.pdf.]

The following tip sheets provide suggestions and activities for use by your partnership's facilitator. The tips are broken down into three key areas: active listening, equalizing participation, and asking good questions to support open communication.

Tip Sheet #1: Active Listening

- Listen and look for what is not being said – non-verbal cues – tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions.
- Ask clarifying questions.
- Summarize key points.
- Communicate that you "hear" what is being said with facial expressions and body motions (e.g., nodding your head).
- Highlight points of agreement.
- Listen at three levels – listen for key points/ideas, feelings, and intentions/values.

Tip Sheet #2: Equalizing Participation

- At the beginning, and as necessary, remind everyone that all input is valued.
- Challenge all partners to abide by "Step Up, Step Back" (those who typically tend to talk less should "step up" making an effort to provide more input, those who naturally tend to talk more should "step back" to allow more input from those who typically speak less).
- Encourage a variety of people to report back and to take different roles.
- Try to balance who is speaking – ask a more dominant person to hold their comments until others have spoken.
- Use small breakout groups to provide different environments for participation.
- Vary the seating arrangement.
- Refer to comments made by some of the quieter partners to encourage them to contribute.
- Keep the meeting interactive, provide nonverbal opportunities for communication (e.g., sticky note voting).
- Pay attention to logistics, breaks, and the "temperature" of the room – both literally (make sure the temperature in the room is comfortable) and figuratively (make sure tempers are not rising or people are not cooling or withdrawing from the discussion).
- Be prepared to change the pace, the activity, or the set up.
- Be prepared to diplomatically counter disrespectful talk and interruptions.
- Watch for power imbalances.
- Communicate openness and support in more than words using facial and body expressions.

Tip Sheet #3: **Asking Good Questions to Support Open Communication**

- Don't ask questions that are really statements.
- Don't assume you know the answer.
- Try not to pre-judge what a person will say.
- Limit yes/no questions.
- Use open-ended questions.
- Don't put individuals on the spot.
- Pose questions that allow everyone to draw on his/her own experience.
- Don't fish for the "right answers." If you want partners to understand a particular point, highlight its importance.
- Be strategic about using open-ended questions. Ask real questions that will prompt discussions to help the partners work through issues (and expect real answers).
- Always record responses. As a facilitator, it is not up to you to decide what is meaningful or right. Recording points on a flip chart also sends the message that what people say is valued.
- Be aware of how you signal "the right answer" or "useful comments" through facial gestures and body language.
- Be ready for new ideas.

[Burke, B., Geronimo, J., Martin, D. A., Thomas, B., & Wall, C. (2002). *Education for Changing Unions* (Chapters 7 and 8). Toronto: Between the Lines.]

More Facilitation Tools

Facilitators are responsible for managing meetings, including the energy in the room. This can often be challenging since partners may have many competing demands on their time. When energy wanes, here are a few strategies a facilitator can employ to keep partners engaged in the meeting:

- Use unscheduled breaks.
- Use an "icebreaker" (e.g., raise a non-controversial question related to your discussion and go around the room to ask each partner for their response).
- Break into small groups to discuss a topic, then regroup and have each group share their ideas.
- When trying to reach consensus, put the choices on a flip chart or whiteboard and have the partners use sticky notes or markers to "vote" or indicate their preference.
- Use active brainstorming.
    - Freewheeling -- Everyone contributes ideas spontaneously. The advantage of this method is that it encourages creativity as people build on each other's ideas. The disadvantage is that quiet partners may not speak up.
    - Round Robin -- Partners take turns presenting their ideas one at a time. The advantage of this method is that all participants get an equal chance to speak up and quiet partners are more likely to contribute. The disadvantage is that it can stifle spontaneity and sometimes members forget their ideas by the time their turn arrives.
    - Slip Method -- Everyone puts their ideas on a slip of paper (or sticky note) and gives it to the facilitator. The advantage to this method is that some people may be more candid

and creative with anonymity preserved. The disadvantage is not hearing other members' ideas ahead of time, which often triggers add-on creativity.

[Adapted from: Office of Quality Management. (2009). *Facilitator's Tool Kit*, http://www.uspto.gov/web/offices/com/oqm-old/Facilitation.pdf.]

Additional Resources

For more tips and resources on group facilitation, visit the following resources:

- **Facilitator's Tool Kit –** http://www.uspto.gov/web/offices/com/oqm-old/Facilitation.pdf.

- **Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making**
  Kaner, S., Lind, L., Toldi, C., Fisk, S., & Berger, D. (2007). *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

2.4 PLAN THE FIRST PARTNERSHIP MEETING

The first meeting will set the tone for your partnership. The preparation leading up to the meeting will play a significant role in its success and can have an impact on the partnership's dynamics going forward.

Choose a Meeting Date, Time, and Location:

- Three weeks before you would like to hold the first meeting (the lead time may vary depending on the members of your partnership), contact the members of the partnership with possible dates, times, and locations for the meeting. There are email and web-based tools that can help with this process, such as Doodle (http://doodle.com/) or, if all partners use Outlook, its "New Meeting Request" feature (click on your calendar and "Actions" on the toolbar).
- Select a date, time, and location that work well for all of the partners.
    - Since it is important for all partners to be present at the first meeting, you may have to reach out to the partners more than once. Since some partners may not be comfortable with technology solutions, follow up by phone if no response is made online. Be open to alternative meeting times (weekends, early mornings, evenings).
    - Find a meeting space that is easily accessible to the partners and where they will all be comfortable. In some instances this may mean meeting in a location not within the office or working space of any of the partners.
    - Make sure the meeting space has all of the features you'll need, such as adequate room setup, breakout rooms (if needed), ability to serve food, technology needs, etc.

Once the meeting is scheduled:

Draft an agenda and circulate it for additions and comments in advance of the meeting. Make sure you allow adequate time (a minimum of a week) for partners to provide feedback on the draft.

Consider how you can use the agenda-making process as an opportunity to create a shared vision for the meeting, observe communication styles, and establish norms for interaction and buy-in before the meeting. The earlier you can get partners working jointly on activities, the sooner relationships will develop and members will take ownership of the partnership.

As the facilitator, you may be responsible for drafting the agenda alone and then sharing it with the partners to get input, or you may have a drafting team. Discuss who will create the draft agenda and who will review the next draft. You may consider sending an abridged agenda to share with the entire partnership to avoid overwhelming people.

The meeting:

To ensure that your partnership gets off on the right track, at the first meeting make sure to:

- Start the meeting on time and acknowledge at the start that you will try to keep the meeting on schedule.
- Make sure all parties agree with the proposed agenda and be flexible; the group should be allowed to add or delete items.
- If there are partners joining the meeting by phone or video conference make sure that connections are working before the meeting starts, and during the meeting make sure they are included in the discussions and given an opportunity to speak.
- Paraphrase participants' contributions strategically to ensure collective clarity and understanding.
- Track agreements and decisions as they are reached. It may be helpful to use a whiteboard or flip chart so that all partners have the same wording to refer back to.

After the meeting:

- Get feedback from the partnership to see if there are any suggestions for improving the productivity and efficiency of the meetings (see **Section 6: Evaluate Your Work Together** for more on assessing the partnership process).
- Distribute the meeting minutes in a timely way that encourages feedback.

Sample Annotated r2p Partnership First Meeting Agenda

R2p Partnership First Meeting
Thursday, Oct. 11th ● 12:00pm – 3:00pm EST

1. Welcome & Introductions……………………………………………………………….12:00 – 12:15
   Discuss purpose of meeting – to discuss how the partnership will work and establish ground rules

2. Partnership Overview…………………………………………………………………….12:15 – 12:30

3. Process, Structure, Governance………………………………………………………..12:30 – 2:45
   Discussion topics:
   - *Characteristics of our partnership (use **Tools 4-A** and **E**)*
   - *Decision-Making Strategy (use **Tool 4-C**)*
   - *Communication (use **Tool 4-G**)*

4. Next Steps…………………………………………………………………………………….2:45 – 3:00
   Suggest meeting topic – develop the partnership's vision, mission and goals; and schedule next meeting

Additional Resources

For more information on planning meetings, visit the following resource:

➲ **Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making**

Kaner, S., Lind, L., Toldi, C., Fisk, S., & Berger, D. (2007). *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.