

# SHARING THE FLOOR: SOME STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE GROUP FACILITATION

Here are techniques to help facilitators of adult RE programs, committee meetings, or small groups ensure that all participants have a chance both to listen and to be heard and to make best use of the group's precious time together.

## 1. Create a Group Covenant

Whatever the primary focus for your group, it is essential to agree on expectations for behavior in your work together and very helpful to have those expectations in writing. Covenants include a range of issues such as arriving on time, keeping confidentiality, the right to pass, "no put-downs," etc. Ongoing groups should review and renew their agreements annually, or whenever new members are added.

A group covenant provides these benefits:

- Expectations are clarified so that misunderstandings are less likely.
- The agreement makes it clear that everyone, not just the leader(s), is responsible for the effectiveness and enjoyment of the group experience.
- The guidelines provide a valid and specific reference for addressing problematic behavior. Leaders or participants can speak to a group member privately or within the group about their concern that a behavior is not in keeping with the agreement.

*Short-form covenanting* is a time-efficient way to help a group agree to guidelines. Prepare a draft on newsprint before the first meeting and ask participants to respond. Invite them to add, delete or modify until everyone understands and accepts the expectations.

*Long-form covenanting* invites the group generate its guidelines from scratch. Although it takes a little longer, it is more participatory and may foster more of a sense of ownership. One approach is to say something like: "Think of a time when you were a member of a productive and safe group. What would make this group productive and safe for you?" List responses and encourage discussion until consensus is reached. Then ask, "What do you think should happen if our behavior is not in keeping with our agreed-upon guidelines?" Discuss.

## 2. Begin On Time, End On Time

Take this responsibility very seriously as a way of modeling respect for the group. This practice gives leaders credibility and builds group trust. It sends the message that this group respects each person's time, needs, and commitments. It also fosters other expressions of respect within the group.

## 3. Post a Timed Agenda

Next to each item, suggest a time, and do an agenda check with the group to get their agreement. Because people like to know what they are doing and where they are going. This is no less important with support groups than with Board

meetings, although the level of detail will vary.

Use the timed agenda to enlist the whole group in taking responsibility for the process. If they fall behind in the timing, say “I’m concerned (or ‘I notice’) that we are behind our agreed-upon schedule. What do you suggest we do about this?” Let the group make suggestions. Usually, they volunteer that they need to be more focused and self-disciplined, particularly if you ask, “Shall we extend our meeting time by 45 minutes?”

Be aware that the group may decide that it really needs to spend the entire time on one activity. If this is the consensus of the group, then it is what they should do, as long as it is an intentional group decision. Responsibility, not inflexibility, is the goal.

## 4. Model Brevity

Leadership is not license to ramble. Make sure your thoughts are organized and succinctly presented. In check-ins and other sharings, be sure you share for less than the allotted time for each person.

## 5. Use a Talking Object

Some groups use a talking stick or other object which one must be holding in order to speak. This practice discourages people from spontaneously (and repeatedly) sharing their thoughts out of turn. It clearly gives the floor to one person at a time, and encourages shared responsibility for participation, since the speaker, not the leader, must decide who to hand it to next.

## 6. Pass a Watch

Person by person sharing can consume much more time than planned. If the group has agreed to a number of minutes for each person’s sharing (such as 2 or 5 minutes), pass a watch with a second hand around the circle. Each person times the person next to them, and gently signals them when their time is almost up. As facilitator, you go first. Of course, common sense should prevail if someone is sharing a particularly painful or otherwise sensitive experience. In groups with a history of saying they want a short check-in and doing a long check-in, this is a consciousness-raiser that often does not have to be repeated.

## 7. Form Small Groups

People like to talk. One way to give everyone more time to talk within a limited timeframe is to divide participants into groups of two or more for discussion. When the whole group re-gathers, the small groups can share according to the time you have allotted—from as little as a word or phrase to a written report.

Use the promise of small group time to interrupt lengthy or tangential discourses, suggesting that the small group exercise will be a more appropriate place to share that story, etc.

## 8. Post an Unfinished Business List

Post a sheet of newsprint on which to list people’s questions and concerns that cannot be addressed in the program without derailing the schedule or focus of the group. As people go off on tangents that are important to them, but not

germane to the task at hand, interrupt politely, affirm that their issue deserves attention, explain that we cannot address it now, write it on the newsprint and promise to return to it. Be sure to return to it at the time you have set aside.

## 9. Equalize Opportunities to Speak

Some people are quick to speak up; others need time for reflection. Some are comfortable competing for the floor; others are not and will not. Here are some techniques to equalize opportunities to speak:

*Moment of Reflection.* After you have raised a question or topic, ask everyone to reflect silently for a minute (or two) and collect their thoughts. Do not allow anyone to break this silence except to ask a clarifying question. Then break the silence by calling on someone who has not spoken at length or by using one of the options below.

*Around the Circle.* Go around the circle with each person who wishes to do so speaking briefly to the topic, starting with someone who has not previously spoken at length.

*Raising Hands.* Ask the group to agree that they will raise their hands when they wish to speak, refraining from interrupting when someone else has the floor. The facilitator makes a note of the order in which people raise their hands and periodically indicates who will have the floor next. For example, "Mary, John, Bill, then Cathy." If this system seems "juvenile" or controlling, try it. It is actually very fair, inclusive, efficient, and relaxing because people can turn their attention to speaking and listening with respect rather than competing for the floor and trying to hold it against the threat of interruptions. A word of caution: it is important that the facilitator facilitate, and not take advantage of the process. A facilitator who wishes to participate in the discussion, must symbolically raise a hand and add themselves to the list.

*Ask that people who have not yet spoken go next.* Remember, this is an invitation; it should not feel coercive or put anyone on the spot.

*Body language.* Watch for body language indicating that someone wants to speak, but is hesitant to compete for the floor. Call on them in an encouraging way.

*Eye Contact.* Try to avoid making eye contact with participants who have been talking too much. It is a green light for them to speak. (It is surprisingly hard to avoid looking at the person you have come to expect to speak out.)

## 10. Conduct a Process Check

Schedule a 5- to 10-minute group process check as a regular feature at the end of each session or meeting. Ask, "How was our process?" When you introduce this concept, make it clear that a process check is not an evaluation of the leader(s), but an invitation to everyone to reflect on their own participation and their experience of the group process as a whole. A process check encourages self-awareness, communicates that everyone shares responsibility for the process, and gives people an opportunity to voice their concerns or suggestions.

## 11. Intervene When Necessary

Usually participants are reluctant to confront each other and look instead to the facilitator to handle dominating members. If preventative strategies have failed, try these interventions.

*Interrupt.* Don't be afraid to interrupt a speaker in front of the group. Letting one individual go on and on is disrespectful of all the participants. Examples of respectful but firm interruptions:

- “Excuse me, Frank, but I’m concerned about the time.”
- “I’m going to stop you there, Mary, because I’m concerned that we are moving off our focus.”
- “Frank, can you summarize your point in 25 words or less, because we need to move on.”
- “Mary, is this an issue we can put on the Unfinished Business list? We can’t address it right now.”

Usually people respond by cooperating, and usually if the facilitator is willing to interrupt garrulous behavior, the garrulous become quieter, the quiet become bolder, and a rough equality evolves. If appropriate, appeal to the group guidelines and the agenda as objective references for behavioral expectations.

*Speak to the person privately.* When a participant is really not responding to preventative strategies or gentle confrontations in the group, speak with the individual at the break or after the meeting. You can be more candid in private.

- Use “I” statements to state the problem: “I am concerned about staying on our schedule.” “I am concerned that not everyone has an opportunity to speak when some people speak at length. It is my responsibility to bring everyone into the process.”
- Name the participant’s behavior if they don’t own it themselves. Be specific. “Frank, are you aware that you interrupted Mary, John and Louise when they were sharing? We agreed as a group to listen to each other respectfully.”
- Give the person an opportunity to voice concerns. “Mary, how is this group working for you? You seemed frustrated tonight. Is there something you need from me or the group?”
- Try to enlist their help in agreeing to a solution. Affirm them and appeal to their sense of fairness. “Frank, I value your participation in this group, and I need to be respectful of everyone’s time and needs. What do you think I should do when someone repeatedly interrupts others?”

Hopefully, the participant will acknowledge their behavior and modify it in the future. If the behavior continues unabated, there may be an issue bigger than the group. Speak with your parish minister or religious educator before confronting the person privately and re-iterating your concerns. If, as a result, the person chooses to leave the group despite your respectful efforts to include them appropriately, do not count it as a “failure.” Your priority as facilitator is the well-being of the group and its process.

For more information contact [adultprograms@uua.org](mailto:adultprograms@uua.org) (<mailto:adultprograms@uua.org>).

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