


# Facilitation

 Structuring and guiding dialogues and decision-making processes to help groups converse and collaborate more productively

## Facilitation Defined

The principle of *facilitation* in organizing, engagement, and equity work refers to the practice of structuring and guiding dialogues, meetings, events, decision-making processes, and other activities using intentional strategies that help groups converse and collaborate more respectfully and productively. While there are many different styles and philosophies of facilitation, and numerous books, articles, and guides have been written on the topic, the type of facilitation most commonly used in education organizing, engagement, and equity work is grounded in the practice of inclusivity, fairness, mutual respect, and democratic decision-making.

Generally speaking, facilitation is used to create a forum for groups of people to express their ideas, concerns, preferences, or priorities, while also listening to and considering the perspectives of others. Facilitators will support group work in organizations and communities by providing rules and structure, framing topics and issues, posing questions, keeping track of time, and recording the main ideas or outcomes that emerge from a dialogue or process. When needed, facilitators may take a more active role to keep the discussion focused and moving forward, or they may intervene when problematic behaviors derail a discussion or compromise the emotional or physical safety of participants.

Facilitators provide structure, direction, and guidance to a dialogue or process, but they do not manage people, issue commands, control discussions, regulate opinions, or determine outcomes. Although facilitators are actively involved in group discussions and deliberations—they may ask challenging questions, provide background information, redirect unproductive arguments, request that speakers clarify unclear statements, and contribute in other ways—they are not considered “participants.” A facilitator primarily attends to process and behaviors, not discussion topics or decision-making outcomes—although facilitators may work with leaders, organizers, and practitioners in an organization or community to design and organize an event, meeting, dialogue, or decision-making process.

Structured and well-executed facilitation can help organizations, teams, and community groups avoid common social tendencies, behaviors, and styles of interacting that can undermine productive discussion and collaboration. For example, facilitators can help individuals with different values, beliefs, or cultural backgrounds listen to one another in constructive ways—rather than defaulting to argumentation or stereotyping—which can improve mutual understanding and appreciation across

difference. Facilitators may also use a variety of techniques to challenge common social biases, conventions, or inequitable dynamics that may cause groups to devalue some perspectives, and over-value others, due to factors such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, education, language proficiency, or organizational hierarchies.

While facilitators may help groups resolve difficult problems or contentious issues, and facilitators will call out disruptive, contentious, hurtful, or hostile comments and behaviors, facilitation is not a dispute-mediation or conflict-resolution process. Facilitators typically help groups uncover and articulate areas of both agreement and disagreement, though facilitated discussions and decision-making processes may or may not achieve consensus, compromise, or full participant support for the ultimate outcome or decision.

In organizing, engagement, and equity work, the outcome of a dialogue and decision-making process typically *emerges from the process*—that is, the process is not manipulated to arrive at an outcome that's been determined in advance by those in positions of power or authority. By applying rules to everyone equally, treating all participants equitably, and modeling, demonstrating, and explaining the behaviors expected of all participants, facilitators help groups converse and collaborate more productively so that the eventual outcome—whatever it might be—results from a process that participants feel was inclusive, fair, respectful, and democratic.

To learn more about how principles can be applied in education organizing, engagement, and equity work, see [HOW PRINCIPLES WORK](#) →

## Facilitation Strategies

This section describes a selection of representative facilitation strategies that may be used in education organizing, engagement, and equity work:

1. **Establishing a welcoming, inclusive, and safe environment for participants**
2. **Developing group agreements**
3. **Equalizing power dynamics among participants**
4. **Being intentional and strategic about diversity—or *attending to differences that make a difference***
5. **Practicing intentional impartiality**
6. **Providing useful information and context**
7. **Guiding the discussion or process**
8. **Building facilitation capacity in an organization or community**

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## **1. Establishing a welcoming, inclusive, and safe environment for participants**

Facilitation is frequently used to create more welcoming, inclusive, and non-threatening environments in which community participants feel more confident, relaxed, or comfortable being vulnerable, speaking up, sharing their ideas, or engaging in potentially contentious or emotionally difficult conversations.

- Attending to physical comfort creates conditions that will feel more welcoming, inclusive, or safe for participants. The availability of food, beverages, comfortable seating, natural light, nearby restrooms, and other amenities can alleviate common symptoms of discomfort, whether it's irritability due to hunger, anxiousness about restroom-related needs, or aches and soreness caused by sitting in uncomfortable chairs for extended periods of time. Physical discomforts and unpleasant spaces can cause people to be more distracted, annoyed, or short-tempered than they would be if they were nourished, hydrated, and at ease.
- Because certain locations may have negative associations for some community members, selecting a neutral, inviting, or familiar location for a meeting, discussion, or event is often essential to creating a context in which participants will feel welcomed, included, and safe. For example, school facilities may be intimidating environments for some community members, such as families who are new to the country, parents who have negative memories of their time in school, or students who want to openly discuss negative experiences they might have had with administrators or teachers. In these cases, a community center, library, or other neutral space will likely feel more secure and less intimidating for participants. In addition, facilitators may design and "co-facilitate" a process with representatives from different community groups as a way to build cultural sensitivity into the discussion, while also modeling inclusivity, power-sharing, and the value of diverse perspectives.
- Because a facilitator's comments and behaviors can "set the tone" for a group interaction, facilitators often intentionally model the kinds of constructive and respectful behaviors they want participants to engage in. For example, facilitators can demonstrate warmth, openness, curiosity, and a non-judgmental attitude toward all participants. Facilitators may also monitor emotional cues and responses for signs that participants feel upset, anxious, threatened, or otherwise uncomfortable or distressed. In these cases, facilitators may intervene to reestablish safety in a variety of ways, such as by calling a break, pulling a participant aside for a one-on-one conversation, or politely but firmly asking certain participants to refrain from making specific comments or engaging in intimidating behaviors.
- Establishing clear expectations at the outset of a dialogue or process can also help participants feel at ease. When expectations depart significantly from the actual experience, participants are more likely to experience frustration and other negative reactions that make them less open with other participants or less receptive to the experience.

Participants may also be anxious about the conversation or process. For example, many people are uncomfortable discussing race in group settings or public forums, and emotionally difficult conversations about racism or privilege can cause them to be apprehensive, worried, irritable, defensive, or even combative. When participants know what they are about to participate in, what the purpose or topic of the discussion will be, and how the process will generally work, they are more likely to feel at ease. Because people tend to feel more relaxed and open when they can visualize and prepare for the experience they are about to have, facilitators can, for example, describe the purpose of the event, how it was planned and organized, how the conversation will unfold, the kinds of emotions people typically experience, the importance of confidentiality, or what should or should not be shared outside the group.

- Facilitators are usually trained and prepared to address unproductive conflicts that might arise or behaviors that are disruptive or intimidating. Problematic social behavior can be caused by a wide variety of factors, including a distrust of the facilitators, organizers, or hosts due to negative experiences they may have had in the past. In addition, some participants may attend an event with the explicit intention of derailing the discussion so it doesn't arrive at conclusions they may object to; bullying personalities may think they know best and try to forcefully impose their ideas on the group; or self-centered participants may try to make the conversation about them and their personal concerns.
- Facilitators often establish rules that explicitly prohibit certain problematic behaviors, and developing protocols for managing difficult, disruptive, or threatening individuals is often part of the planning process for a community dialogue or process. A range of appropriate and proportionate responses—ranging from friendly reminders directed at the whole group to more pointed requests directed at individuals—will also be used by experienced facilitators, including asking everyone in a group to “self-monitor” their own behaviors, and the behaviors of other participants, to ensure that exchanges remain respectful and no one in the group feels threatened or silenced.

→ For a related discussion, see the [Accessibility Principle](#) of organizing, engagement, and equity

## 2. Developing group agreements

For structured events, activities, and dialogues, facilitators typically establish group agreements—sometimes called “ground rules” or “group norms,” among other terms—before a discussion or process gets underway. If facilitators want to create an inclusive, respectful, equitable, and democratic space, establishing group agreements is widely viewed as an essential strategy, particularly when a discussion is likely to become contentious, when disruptions or bullying behaviors are anticipated, when authority figures may attempt to control the agenda or silence certain viewpoints, or when participants represent a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural identities, or political beliefs.

- Group agreements function similar to the rules used in games and sports: participants agree to follow the same set of rules, and they help participants understand the terms of an interaction, activity, or discussion. Group agreements describe the specific behaviors that will be expected of participants, and they help participants understand how a process will proceed before it begins. Establishing group agreements can significantly improve the quality and productiveness of a dialogue or process, while also decreasing the likelihood of misunderstanding or rudeness—particularly when interactions are likely to become contentious or discussion topics are controversial.
- Group agreements perform a few important functions: (1) group agreements establish a foundation of shared agreement at the outset of a discussion or activity that participants can build on during subsequent interactions; (2) group agreements explicitly bar certain negative behaviors from a group interaction and encourage more constructive behaviors; and (3) group agreements allow facilitators and participants to enforce the agreed-upon rules by reminding others of the agreements they made at the outset of a discussion or process.
- Group agreements are typically established in one of three ways: (1) facilitators will propose a set of agreements, usually by incorporating group agreements that have been effective in other contexts or widely used by professional facilitators, (2) participants co-develop group agreements using a democratic process proposed by facilitators, or (3) facilitators propose a set of group agreements but give participants the opportunity to modify or add to the rules using a democratic process. All three approaches can be effective, and facilitators typically choose an approach based on time constraints, the goals of a process, or the needs of a particular group.
- Participants are usually willing to accept a set of proposed group agreements if they seem fair and reasonable to them, and if facilitators explain why the agreements are important or mention that they are standard rules that have been widely used in other organizations or communities. It is essential that facilitators explain the rationale for using group agreements and why certain agreements are important for the discussion or activity that follows. When additional agreements are suggested by participants, it can be helpful to the group if those who are proposing the new agreement also share their thinking and rationale.
- After participants commit to following the group agreements, facilitators usually make sure they remain prominently displayed for the duration of the dialogue or activity. The agreements can be written on poster paper and handouts or they can be projected on a screen. Visible agreements serve as reminders for participants, and they allow facilitators to reference them more easily when needed. Group agreements also educate participants about the specific behaviors that are expected of them, which becomes particularly valuable if a discussion or interaction becomes disrespectful. In these cases, group agreements provide a non-threatening method for naming and correcting negative group behaviors. When rules have not been proactively established at the outset of a discussion or process, for example, participants may be more likely to get defensive or hostile when their behaviors are called out and challenged.
- Facilitators may utilize a variety of facilitative techniques to ensure that participants follow group agreements, including politely pointing out that an agreement is being broken or directing the group's attention to the agreed-upon rules when problematic behaviors

threaten to disrupt a discussion. Facilitators may also need to call out and challenge disrespectful behavior, harmful language, or threatening mannerisms that might intimidate or silence some participants. In addition to calling out transgressions, facilitators may propose that participants snap their fingers, or use some other signal, if they believe someone has broken an agreement.

→ **For a related discussion, see the [Dialogue Principle of organizing, engagement, and equity](#)**

#### **Discussion: Insensitive Group Agreements**

In some cases, facilitators will propose ground rules that may be insensitive or counterproductive in certain circumstances. Agreements such as “assume good intentions” or “trust one another” are two examples. While such rules may be well-intentioned, participants in some communities and organizations may be unable to assume positive intentions, or easily bring trust into a conversation with strangers, due to past personal experiences with bigotry, bullying, discrimination, or violence. For example, “assume positive intentions” is not a productive group agreement if staff members routinely experience workplace bias or discrimination because of their gender identity, race, or sexuality. When establishing group agreements, facilitators should remain mindful of history, identity, culture, and other factors that may influence how participants experience a dialogue, process, or other activity.

### **3. Equalizing power dynamics among participants**

In organizing, engagement, and equity work, facilitators typically take intentional steps to equalize power dynamics in a dialogue or process, and a variety of facilitation strategies will be used to include, recognize, or affirm the voice and influence of community members and groups, especially those who have been historically underrepresented, marginalized, silenced, or excluded.

- Facilitators can help to equalize power dynamics in a variety of ways, such as by applying group agreements to everyone equally, regardless of their position or status in an organization or community; by creating space in a discussion for less vocal or confident participants to speak up by asking talkative participants to speak less, for example; or by structuring a conversation so that everyone in a group is given the same amount of time to express their views. Because group agreements establish foundational behavioral expectations for a discussion or process, the agreements often explicitly address issues of equity and power, which is also why facilitators often use a transparent democratic process to co-develop group agreements with participants. The first step toward equalizing unequal power dynamics typically occurs when organizational leaders, authority figures, public officials, and others with power or influence publicly agree to follow the same rules as everyone else.

- Facilitators typically avoid auditorium-style seating that discourages face-to-face conversation and features such as elevated stages, microphones, and podiums that are associated with institutions of unequal power, especially in contexts in which unequal power and authority may have been abused. Instead, facilitators may arrange seats in circles or u-shapes, for example, so that participants are looking at one another. Room arrangements that encourage participants to see one another as equals, and that foster a sense of togetherness and connection, are typically used in organizing, engagement, and equity work—although adjustments and accommodations may need to be made for personal boundaries or cultural identities that would make particular room and seating arrangements a source of anxiety or stress.
- Equalizing power dynamics can also help community members have more constructive conversations about potentially divisive issues. In recent years, for example, formal public meetings—such as city council or school board meetings—have become increasingly contentious and adversarial in many communities, and activities such as community dialogues offer an alternative space for the respectful exchange of ideas and the exploration of constructive community solutions. Assuring “safety” in a discussion or process can take many forms in organizing, engagement, and equity work, and attending to real and potential misuses of power or authority is an important dimension of safety. For example, facilitators may create “space” for those who have less power in a community, and whose concerns have historically been disregarded or disrespected, by giving equal time, legitimacy, and affirmation to their voices and priorities in a decision-making process.
- Facilitators may also monitor authority figures, and others in positions of power or influence, to ensure they do not dominate discussions, force their viewpoints on others, hijack a process, or otherwise intimidate, manipulate, or coerce participants. In many organizations and communities, there are longstanding patterns of cultural deference toward those holding positions of power, authority, influence, and status, and employees, students, families, and other community members may be hesitant to speak up for fear of public recrimination or professional retaliation. Because a decision-making process, whether it’s an informal staff meeting or formal committee proceeding, can be controlled or co-opted—either intentionally or unintentionally—by powerful figures to protect their interests, validate their opinions, advance their personal agendas, or secure apparent group support for a decision they already made, facilitation can be used to hold power in check and create forums for a more equitable exchange of ideas and viewpoints.

#### **4. Being intentional and strategic about diversity—or *attending to differences that make a difference***

In organizing, equity, and equity work, achieving a diversity of community representation is typically a central value and an explicit goal. While the term “diversity” is most often associated with race and ethnicity, diversity can encompass the many varied cultural backgrounds, identities, and viewpoints represented in a given organization or community, including diversity of gender, age, ability, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, professional role, or language ability, among other factors. Diversity also extends to less visible internal characteristics, such as diversity of experiences,

perspectives, ideas, ideologies, or beliefs.

- In organizing, engagement, and equity work grounded in the practice of inclusion, equity, and democratic decision-making, diverse community representation is often used to challenge or overcome historical patterns of exclusion, inequity, and biased decision-making. For example, diversity of representation in a discussion or process can ensure that formerly ignored, dismissed, or silenced concerns are expressed, heard, listened to, and prioritized, or that community members who have historically been excluded from decision-making are actively involved and given meaningful leadership roles. When diversity of representation is overlooked or neglected, the conditions of any given discussion or process are more likely to result in biased decisions or outcomes that favor the perspective, concerns, and priorities of those who were represented or those who hold positions of power and authority.
- Facilitators also prioritize diversity because it can improve both a process and its outcomes. When diverse perspectives are involved in a discussion of problems affecting an organization or community, for example, the process is more likely to produce a wider range of insights and ideas that are more creative, more innovative, and more likely to result in effective proposals and solutions. In this case, facilitators may make time for those who are most directly or severely impacted by a problem to share their stories and experiences, or they may develop activities that ask participants to consider well-known problems in more imaginative and unconventional ways.
- In certain situations, some differences may be more relevant or important than others, and facilitators may use a wide variety of strategies to ensure that the perspectives of diverse community members heard or that certain perspectives are amplified. For example, the age of the participants involved in a discussion can have a significant influence on the process and its outcomes. Older residents who have lived in a community for a long time, for example, may recall specific stories that illuminate the origins of a given problem, or they may remember past attempts to address a problem that ultimately failed—and the specific reasons why those attempts failed. Or the perspectives of students and young adults may be unintentionally excluded or silenced in schools, even when adults are discussing ways to address problems that adversely affect young people. In these cases, a facilitator might start a conversation by asking the group's oldest members to share their ideas first, or they may push back if adults start talking over younger participants or treating their perspectives dismissively.
- Facilitators may also monitor and attend to visible differences that affect the dynamics of group discussion or process, such as skin color, language proficiency, religious garments, unconventional hairstyles, visible tattoos, or the condition of someone's clothing. If facilitators intentionally model full acceptance of all forms of difference in a group, participants are more likely to display acceptance toward those who may look or act differently than them. For example, facilitators may make accommodations for participants who face language-related challenges, whether it's due to hearing impairments, differences in fluency or dialect, or a lack of exposure to certain words or concepts. In these cases, facilitators may describe important terms in accessible language, repeat comments to make

sure everyone heard what was said, or ask participants to take a few minutes to jot down their thoughts before expressing them verbally.

## 5. Practicing intentional impartiality

When facilitating a discussion or decision-making process, the intentional practice of impartiality can help to create conditions for more respectful interactions, more effective problem-solving, and more productive group collaboration, particularly among parties that are mutually distrustful or in communities experiencing tensions and conflicts. For example, facilitators may refrain from taking sides in a disagreement, expressing ideologically biased viewpoints, or showing favoritism toward certain ideas, individuals, or groups.

- In politically, ideologically, or culturally divided contexts, community members may be unwilling to even consider participating in an organizing, engagement, or equity process due to suspicion and distrust stemming from negative past experiences. For example, families may be suspicious of any event organized by a school they believe has mistreated them or their children, or community groups that have publicly fought over an issue may distrust the individuals and groups they opposed. The promise of impartial facilitation can help to get wary community members “to the table” by offering a context in which mutually distrustful parties are more likely to feel that they will be treated fairly or that their viewpoints will not be criticized, judged, or disparaged.
- To demonstrate impartiality, communities and organizations may use facilitators who have not taken a public position on a controversial topic, who are trusted by different constituencies in a community, or who are unaffiliated with the community or organization—i.e., they are not residents, employees, or paid representatives. In some cases, the perception and anticipation of an impartial process will be as important as the practice of impartial facilitation, given that community members may decline to participate in a process if they believe it will be biased against them.
- At the outset of a process or dialogue, facilitators who are practicing intentional impartiality may share their name and describe their role, but leave out other personal information that might suggest they are partial toward a particular topic, perspective, idea, or group. During group discussions, facilitators may be careful not to show bias for or against any participants or the beliefs they express, which requires facilitators to practice self-awareness and monitor their own comments and behaviors to ensure they don’t inadvertently communicate partiality. For example, behaviors such as leaning toward or away from certain participants, directing follow-up questions to some people while ignoring others, or smiling or nodding in response to some comments but not others could all suggest partiality for certain participants over others.
- Facilitators can also practice what Martin Carcasson and Leah Sprain have called **passionate impartiality**. Passionately impartial facilitators are “passionate about their community, democracy, and solving problems,” for example, but they are “committed to

serving a primarily impartial, process-focused role” to improve communication, engagement, and collaboration in group settings. In dialogues and engagement work, the intentional practice of passionate impartiality can help to address what Carcasson and colleagues call the “**neutrality challenge**,” which refers to the difficulty of maintaining “politically neutral processes while also working for more equitable outcomes.” When practicing passionate impartiality, facilitators can remain committed to upholding valued principles—such as inclusion, equity, mutual respect, democratic decision-making, or social justice—while also putting aside ideological biases or political preferences for the purpose of facilitating a constructive dialogue or process in which participants may come from different backgrounds, have different cultural identities, or hold competing interests, ideas, or viewpoints.

### Discussion: When Impartiality May Not Be Advisable

Impartiality can be an effective facilitation strategy in many situations, but it may not be advisable in every situation. All facilitators bring biases, preferences, and ideological dispositions into their work, of course, because no one is capable of perfect impartiality, neutrality, or objectivity. Partiality is simply part of being human.

In some circumstances, **acting authentically** or **practicing transparency** may be more effective facilitation strategies than maintaining the appearance of impartiality. For example, facilitators might discuss their identities or cultural backgrounds to connect with participants on a personal level or encourage them to share their personal stories, or they may discuss their own biases as a way to model self-awareness and intentional self-reflection for participants.

In addition, different engagement goals or community audiences may require different facilitation strategies. A principles-based approach to organizing, engagement, and equity is **based on the premise** that the fundamental elements of the work—such as *facilitation*, *authenticity*, or *transparency*—can be customized to meet the distinct needs of the moment. A standard strategy that works in most cases may not work in specific cases, and facilitators may need to rely on instinct, judgement calls, or their personal knowledge of participants—rather than prescribed facilitation strategies—given that every community is unique and social dynamics are ever-changing.

## 6. Providing useful information and context

Community members will enter an organizing, engagement, or equity process with different levels of knowledge about a given topic, different levels of experience with the process being used, and different ideas about how the process should go or what the outcomes should be. At the outset of a process or dialogue, facilitators often provide essential information that helps participants establish a foundation of common understanding.

- For example, facilitators may provide suggested definitions for terms with nuanced or

complex meanings—such as “organizing,” “engagement,” or “equity”—so that participants can discuss where their respective definitions either converge or diverge. Facilitators and participants may also co-develop new definitions that reflect the different interpretations and understandings that emerged during the discussion. Suggesting or co-creating definitions is one method facilitators might use to help groups develop a “**shared language**,” which can minimize confusion, misunderstandings, headstrong debates, and other reactions or behaviors that tend to occur when people are using the same words but defining them differently. In addition, “co-constructive” activities, such as collaboratively developing shared definitions in groups, can also give participants an opportunity to learn from one another and improve their knowledge and understanding of complex or nuanced concepts and practices.

- Facilitators may also provide information or data to establish a set of baseline facts for a discussion or process. When discussions are based on assumptions, misinterpretations, flawed information, or rumors, for example, it can derail productive discussions, cause confusion, and compromise the effectiveness of a problem-solving activity or decision-making process (because the problem is less likely to be solved or the eventual decision is less likely to be effective). Whether it’s the demographic data for a community, disciplinary rates for a school, or the pros and cons of a proposed policy, grounding a discussion or process in a set of agreed-upon facts can help to keep discussions focused and constructive. For example, a foundation of agreed-on facts reduces the likelihood that participants will get into lengthy disagreements about the accuracy or sourcing of factual information, and it can also help participants stay focused on a single issue, rather than lapsing into digressive discussions about multiple unrelated issues. If a dispute arises about the accuracy of particular information, the disagreement can be noted and recorded by the facilitator for fact-checking later on—a facilitation strategy that can help refocus the group on the issue under discussion and keep the process moving forward.
- When groups discuss issues in their particular organization or community, facilitators can provide a larger scope of information that helps participants contextualize or better understand the problem or opportunity being discussed—which can result in more effective proposals and better-informed decisions. For example, participants may rely on their own limited personal experiences and subjective perceptions—rather than on statistical data that illuminates larger trends over time—which might bias or limit proposed ideas in certain circumstances. Or if a community group is discussing student behavior and disciplinary policies in a school, the discussion may be influenced by unconscious bias, negative past experiences with disruptive youth, or limited exposure to alternative approaches to student discipline. Consequently, participants may propose ideas that are not based on what’s actually happening with student behavior in the school, or they may only consider the traditional forms of discipline they’re familiar with. In this example, a facilitator might provide statistics showing disciplinary rates for different student populations in the school, district, state, and country, and descriptions of alternative approaches to discipline that have been effective in other schools.
- Discussion guides are often used to provide the essential information and context that will help participants to engage in a productive discussion or process. Discussion guides include features such as framing questions for a dialogue, relevant data presented in easy-to-

understand charts or graphs, and descriptions of the purpose, structure, and timeline of a process. In some cases, discussion guides will be developed by a diverse committee that represents different perspectives, roles, or cultural backgrounds in an organization or community, and the guide will explain who was involved and how the process was organized. A community-constructed discussion guide can provide a variety of advantages. For example, skeptical or distrustful participants may be less suspicious of a process that was developed by a group that included people they feel represent their perspective, or the framing questions may be more relevant to the needs or concerns of participants, and more sensitive to cultural differences, because they were developed by people who know the community well.

## **7. Guiding the discussion or process**

A facilitator's central role is to guide a discussion or process so that groups, organizations, and communities can achieve self-identified goals or take actions that are in the best interests of their staff, students, families, and other stakeholders. In the execution of that role, facilitators may use an expansive range of strategies that have been developed by facilitators over decades of practice and real-world application. Below are a few illustrative examples of facilitation strategies that are commonly used in organizing, engagement, and equity work:

- Facilitators may try to talk as little as necessary to free up as much time for group discussion and deliberation as possible. As the conversation proceeds, facilitators typically listen more and talk less, which helps the group own the discussion and its outcomes. Facilitators also intentionally monitor their own verbal behaviors to make sure they are modeling the kind of comments and exchanges they want the group to engage in. Participants pick up on a facilitator's subtle (or not so subtle) social cues, so facilitators who act respectfully, for example, will tend to encourage mutually respectful behavior in the group.
- Rather than standing on a stage or in front of a room—physical positions that convey authority or control—facilitators often assume the same physical position as participants, such as sitting in a group circle or at a discussion table. They may adopt a relaxed attitude or speaking style to help participants feel more at ease, and they may maintain a physical posture that is confident without being assertive. Facilitators typically strive to be in control, but not controlling, and they want the attention to be focused on the group, not themselves.
- Facilitators attend to the flow of the conversation among participants by, for example, making sure that discussions don't become back-and-forth exchanges between two outspoken individuals, or that quieter and less assertive participants are given opportunities to contribute.
- Periodically in a discussion or process, facilitators usually summarize the main ideas that have emerged from a group discussion, which may either take the form of verbal

summaries or the documentation of ideas on poster board or screen projections so that all participants can see and validate the written record of their discussion. In some cases, facilitators may ask the group for a volunteer who would like to take notes, or they may design the process so that note-taking responsibilities may be shared by multiple participants taking turns. Facilitators will often check in with a group at regular intervals in a process to confirm that the main ideas are being captured accurately, and efforts are usually made to record discussions, to the extent possible, in the participants' own words. When participants can visually see that their specific comments and contributions have been accurately recorded by a facilitator or notetaker, it can help to increase trust and confidence in a process.

- Written records of group discussions typically include points of agreement and disagreement to ensure that all perspectives and contributions are preserved, most commonly in the form of written summary reports that are shared with participants. Recording all sides of a discussion or disagreement not only communicates to participants that their contributions were recognized and valued, but it also ensures that authority figures, majority groups, and other historically dominant voices do not unilaterally control and determine the written record of a proceeding—and therefore the perception of what did or did not happen or what was or was not agreed to.
- In addition, dissenting viewpoints, constructive criticism, and the perceptions of non-majority participants often introduce creative, unexpected, and revealing insights that might otherwise have been ignored, dismissed, or silenced in an organizational or community decision-making process. If only areas of “agreement” are recorded, the record often reflects the majority viewpoint of dominant groups, which can be selectively biased in any number of ways. Dissenting, critical, or non-majority perspectives can also help groups develop a more complete, nuanced, and accurate understanding of a community problem, for example, which can help to bridge cultural or ideological divides and enable groups to develop ideas, plans, or proposals that are more likely to be effective.
- Facilitators typically monitor the focus—or lack of focus—in a group discussion or process. When participants lose focus—such as when individual participants digress from the topic at length or the discussion starts to go in several unrelated directions—facilitators will typically intervene, note that where the discussion went off track, and ask the group if they would like to re-focus on the framing question or topic at hand. In some cases, facilitators will call for a brief “time out” or introduce an activity to help reset the discussion and refocus a group. For example, a break can help to dissipate group tensions in a discussion that's become heated or contentious, and physical activities can help to re-energize groups that have become visibly distracted or lethargic.
- Facilitators routinely use a variety of questioning strategies to help groups share their personal experiences, talk candidly about difficult issues, clarify their ideas, or “complicate” a discussion by asking participants to reflect on their own biases or consider nuances might otherwise be overlooked. Facilitators will often encourage group participants to ask one another questions, and they may describe effective questions techniques. For example, a facilitator might suggest that participants ask “probing” or “clarifying” follow-up questions when someone expresses a viewpoint they disagree with, rather than immediately challenging the comment based on uninformed assumptions about the other person's

values, beliefs, or motivations.

- Other questioning techniques may be used to introduce community perspectives that are not represented in a group discussion or decision-making process. For example, if a particular cultural perspective or community role is absent, facilitators might ask the group to consider which perspectives are missing and what those individuals might think about the issue at hand if they were present. For example, a facilitator might ask: “If the superintendent was here right now, what might she say about this issue?” or “This group seems to agree that we need to increase the school budget. But what if a few families struggling to pay their property taxes were here tonight? What do you think those parents might say?”
- Another common facilitation technique is creating space for groups to debrief or reflect on a discussion or process. Many formal or public decision-making processes, such as a city council or school board meeting, will conclude without any discussion of the process that was used or the outcomes that resulted, which can be frustrating to community members who might have felt their viewpoints or concerns were excluded from the proceeding. Facilitators will typically build in time both during and at the conclusion of a group dialogue for participants to discuss which elements of the process worked well for them or didn’t work so well, or facilitators may ask each member of the group to share their thoughts on the decision or outcome that resulted from the process. In some cases, facilitators will also take notes during these discussions so that written summaries can be provided to participants. Creating a structured forum for debriefing and group reflection is another way that facilitators support inclusive, fair, and democratic decision-making in organizations and communities.

## **8. Building facilitation capacity in an organization or community**

Building facilitation capacity—that is, increasing the number of skilled facilitators by providing training, practice sessions, and other opportunities that help them acquire or improve their facilitation skills—can be one of the most powerful and transformative organizing, engagement, and equity strategies available to schools, organizations, and communities. Because facilitation helps people converse and collaborate in more respectful and productive ways, facilitators often play an instrumental role in helping groups overcome deeply rooted institutional dysfunction, patterns of abusive behaviors, toxic cultures and interactions, or misuses of power and authority.

- In many schools, organizations, and communities, the only individuals with facilitation experience or skills are certain kinds of professionals—such as educators, school administrators, or public officials—who routinely use facilitation in their work. When facilitation skills are unevenly distributed, facilitation roles often default to those with experience. And if the available facilitators are not intentional about or committed to practicing inclusion, equity, or democratic decision-making, the discussions or decision-making processes they facilitate are less likely to be fully inclusive, genuinely fair, or

authentically democratic. For example, the facilitators may select locations that are comfortable for them, such as a school facility or town-hall conference room that may not be welcoming or readily accessible to some community members or groups, or the facilitators may design a process that doesn't provide enough time, or the right structure, for all participants to contribute equitably.

- The strategic use of facilitation is also a way to build power in a community, particularly among individuals and groups that may have aligned interests but that have not worked together in the past. For example, the success of a community-organizing campaign is often determined by a group's ability to negotiate different interests and priorities while engaging in a productive and democratic decision-making process that all participants feel is fair and legitimate. If community organizers ask students, families, and interest groups to volunteer their time to attend meetings that are disorganized, combative, and unproductive, the campaign is unlikely to get off the ground, mobilize a sufficient number of stakeholders, or build the kind of passionate, sustained commitment that's required to execute a successful campaign over weeks, months, or years.
- Because facilitation skills take time and practice to acquire, schools, organizations, and communities may not have enough skilled facilitators available unless they proactively invest in building facilitation capacity well before that capacity is needed. For example, facilitators often help communities come together and heal in the aftermath of a tragedy or crisis, but when unforeseen circumstances suddenly arise, communities may not have a group of facilitators they can call in or rely on. In addition, activities such as facilitated community dialogues often surface concerns or problems that may have long been ignored or dismissed by those in power, but if the dialogues are never held—if there are no facilitators to organize and guide them—those concerns and problems may continue to be ignored. Facilitation can be used strategically to surface community issues that demand action, mobilize community actions to address issues, and activate responses to community issues after occur.
- Building facilitation capacity in a school, organization, or community is another way to develop and strengthen youth, family, and community leadership skills and ensure more diverse representation in leadership roles. Confident and skilled facilitation can be a vital leadership ability, and community members who can organize and facilitate a group process often take on or evolve into other leadership roles. Community organizers, for example, might intentionally recruit and train youth and family facilitators from diverse cultural backgrounds or different neighborhoods so that they can be called on when facilitation is needed in a particular cultural community or neighborhood. Having a diverse coalition of facilitators who can alternate leadership and facilitation roles also allows communities and groups to model inclusivity, diversity, and democratic representation in their practice.

## Acknowledgments

Organizing Engagement thanks Bruce Mallory, Kip Holley, and [Jon Martinez](#) for their contributions to

developing and improving this resource.

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