Tips for Facilitating a Discussion

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The facilitator’s role:

* A facilitator enables groups to work more effectively; to collaborate and achieve synergy.
* A facilitator does not take sides, but advocates for a fair, open, and inclusive process.
* A facilitator is a learning guide to assist a group in thinking deeply about its beliefs and its processes.

Who Speaks?

Stacking

* Let’s say that you are in charge of leading a discussion for 10 fellow students. You ask the question, “What is one thing you’re passionate about?” and 10 hands shoot up. Who do you call on first?! What about the other 9 people? Stacking is a way that you can set an order for people to share out in. In this example, you would create an order of people to share their answer by saying their name (Kevin, then Sara, then Kate, ect.). This allows for everyone’s voices to be heard in an orderly fashion.

Encouraging

* At the beginning of the discussion, encourage people to set aside everything else going on in their lives and invest in the discussion. Throughout the discussion, encourage participation from everyone, not just the people who talk the most.

Balancing

* It’s really easy to call on the people who always have their hands up after you ask a question. Balancing is the technique of calling on people who may not have their hand raised, but who you think still have something to offer to the discussion. Balancing also means that if you get answers from a couple people of the same group (race, gender, grade level) in a row, call on someone from a different group next.

Making Space

* Make space throughout the discussion where people feel comfortable sharing their answers. What does that look like? At the beginning of the discussion, you can ask the group what does a safe space for sharing look like and create a list of expectations to follow for the discussion. Throughout the discussion, remind people (in a positive tone) to continue to follow the expectations of a safe space.

How do you elicit perspectives?

* Exciting perspectives can be tough, especially if you don’t know anyone in the room. Some ways that you can do this is after someone shares their answer or opinion to a question, ask the room, “does anyone agree or disagree with that statement?” Encourage people to challenge (in a respectable manner) answers.

Reflective Listening

* Reflective listening means that people partaking in the discussion are focused on the person talking, instead of thinking about what they are going to say next. If you can focus and “live in the moment”, you’ll get more out of the discussion and you’ll be suprised by your ability to think on the spot after someone is done sharing. As a facilitator, allow for about 10 seconds between answers to let people reflect on the previous answer and form their thoughts if they want to share next.

Tolerating Silences

* This is perhaps the toughest part of facilitation. If you pose a question and nobody raises their hand to answer, what do you do? You wait! A good metric for waiting for someone to answer is about 30 seconds (which can seem like an eternity). This allows for people to have enough time to formulate their answers because not everyone thinks quickly. If nobody raises their hand after 30 seconds, rephrase the question into a simpler form.

Switching from open to individual or small group formats

* If people are not answering questions in a large group discussion, ask people to split up into small groups (2-4 people) and ask them to talk about the question in their small groups. After giving a couple minutes for a small group discussion, bring everyone back into the larger group and ask people to share what their groups talked about. People can hide in a large group setting, but they can’t really in a smaller group.