

Advanced Facilitation Guide

The facilitator is responsible for managing meetings, keeping conversations on track, and ensuring each member's voice is heard. This guide covers both basic and advanced tips for how to accomplish these tasks. You can also reference the [Facilitation Tip Sheet](#) for only the basic guidelines for facilitation (suggested for new or interim facilitators).

You can read through this document as often as needed to help keep your responsibilities in mind. You might find it helpful to print it out and bring it with you to CoP meetings and events. We suggest that you coordinate your activities with the person who is leading your community as well as any SMEs.

Community of Practice Meetings

During each meeting held by your community, it's important to have someone manage the meeting. Although at the time of community inception, there may not be an individual with the role of official Facilitator, it is vital to have someone take on the responsibility. By assigning the task for each meeting, you ensure that one individual stays impartial to the discussion topic and acts as a traffic cop as necessary. As your CoP grows, you can identify someone to take on the role for a specific period of time.

For a quick "At a Glance" guide to meeting facilitation, read the [Facilitation Tip Sheet](#) that provides a summary of the basic steps to facilitate a CoP meeting.

This Advanced Meeting Guide provides a deeper examination into meeting management and Community of Practice facilitation for the person taking on that facilitation role.

This guide contains:

1. **Community of Practice Facilitation** - This section provides an explanation of the role of an advanced facilitator in a Community of Practice. In the simplest definition a facilitator is someone who makes things happen – a meeting, a connection, a learning agenda. An advanced facilitator will play an active role in the CoP and facilitate much more than events.
2. **What Makes a Good Facilitator?** - It's hard to say if good facilitators are born or made, but there are some basic traits that characterize good facilitators.
3. **What are the Facilitator's Responsibilities?** - Now that you've got the basics down, what are some of the responsibilities you might want to consider as you grow in your facilitator role? This section covers many of the items that advanced facilitators take on over time.
4. **What Do I Do?** - Facilitation is not an easy job. It's a challenging role and this section provides some concrete suggestions and trouble-shooting tips on managing challenging events and individuals.
5. **Attachments** – Basic templates for an Agenda, Discussion Log, Follow-Up Item Log, and Meeting Feedback.

1. Community of Practice Facilitation

In a Community of Practice, the facilitator is likely to be a member of the CoP, someone who is familiar with the content and has a stake in the decision. However, when serving in this role, neutrality is key. Your goal is to have a productive discussion. As a facilitator you must concern yourself with the group process more than the outcome. Keep in mind that there is a difference between neutrality and passivity. By effectively mediating the group process, you play an active and critical role in ensuring that a community taps deeply into its own knowledge and doesn't lapse into "groupthink." Groupthink occurs

when the pressure to conform within a group interferes with the group's capacity to realistically analyze a problem and collectively develop a viable solution.

While this document focuses primarily on how to facilitate meetings, events, and information-sharing, in a Community of Practice the facilitator has a broader role. The facilitator works very closely with the community's subject matter expert to provide direction for the group and to ensure that the right topics are on the table. Specifically, the facilitator in a Community of Practice will work with the SME to:

- **Identify salient issues in the community** – what are members talking about and about what are they passionate?
- **Seed the community with content** – a good facilitator will do background research to get information that is likely to peak members' interests. A facilitator will also do follow-up research to find information to address member content needs and concerns.
- **Plan and facilitate community events** – it is important for the facilitator to play a strong role in determining the type and frequency of meetings and events in a community to ensure they are useful to members.
- **Informally link community members and span boundaries between communities** – getting to know your community through facilitation means that you will want to ensure that the right connections are being made. Part of the role of the facilitator is recognizing when connections need to be made – between members or between communities – and prompting the community's Leader or People Connector to make those connections.
- **Assess the health of the community and evaluate its contribution to members and their organizations** – the tone of meetings and feedback you receive can be a good indicator of how people are doing and how the community is faring. You may be the first person to notice any signs of trouble.

2. What Makes a Good Facilitator?

They are "people" people. At its core, facilitation is a people business. Good Community of Practice facilitators know that all members have something to contribute and have a desire to help them bring those contributions to the community's purpose. They also recognize how important it is to bring a human element to events occurring across space and time.

They are quick thinkers. Good facilitators are required to keep track of various items simultaneously: timing, questions, outstanding issues to be addressed, and the speaking or questions "queue." And they must do all of this with a clear sense of in what direction to lead the group next. In addition to these mechanical issues, facilitators must also be aware of the mental and emotional status of the group in order to keep everyone moving at an appropriate pace and ensure that no one gets "lost" in the process.

They are excellent communicators. Good communication starts with good listening. Communities rely on facilitators to hear what is being said, discern context and subtext, and translate it in a way that has meaning for the rest of the community. The facilitator knows what questions to ask and when to ask them. And, they do all of this with patience and a respect for the culture of the community. Good facilitators must also have a good verbal and oral presence and be able to succinctly relay information to other members.

They are both product and process oriented. Facilitators must be concerned with what gets produced – the product, as well as how it gets produced – the process. The community's learning agenda must be facilitated in a way that supports the community's charter and culture, but decisions must get made. Productive facilitators keep the end product in mind, but never lose site of the process by which that product is developed.

3. What are the Facilitator's Responsibilities?

Prepare in advance.

Good facilitators make their work look effortless and natural, but advance preparation is key. Preparation involves working with other community leaders to determine the purpose of the meeting, the desired or intended outcomes of the meeting, and deciding what methods and tools will most efficiently and effectively assist in achieving those outcomes.

Consider the following:

- ***Why is the meeting or event being held?*** Take into consideration the overall goal of the meeting and what outcomes are anticipated at the end of the meeting or event. By knowing where you want to go, you can better map the route to get you there.
- ***Who is attending, or likely to attend, and who is not going to be there?*** It is important to know the attendees so that you can determine that the right people are going to be present if decisions need to be made. If attendance at the event, in terms of numbers or the types of members, will impact the successful completion of tasks, you'll want to have some options for steering the meeting if attendance does not pan out as anticipated. It is also important to consider who cannot come or who was not invited as well so that you can steer the meeting to accomplish the determined goals. Finally, determine if there are any member dynamics to consider such as new member introduction, known conflicts, or close relationships so that you can plan to address or be sensitive to any of those items.
- ***What tasks are planned?*** When planning, it is important to determine how much time can be allotted for each agenda item and whether or not you will have an adequate amount of time to do what needs to be done. If it appears that you may run a little short, consider dropping some items until a later date or expanding the time for the meeting.
- ***Where is the meeting to be held?*** You'll want to take into consideration a variety of factors when it comes to managing your meeting or event space. First, determine if the meeting will be face-to-face, virtual, or both. You'll need to ensure that either a physical or virtual meeting space is conducive to producing the intended outcomes and ensure that you have adequate resources such as flipcharts, markers, and other supplies. If documentation or a recording is needed, ensure that the note taker role can be assigned in advance or at the meeting. Additionally, determine if participants will need advance instructions for participating, like driving or log-in directions.

Once you've considered the who, what, why, and where, you can decide the how - which facilitation and decision-making methods to employ. For example, voting might be an efficient way to make logistical decisions, but determining a task for a project or sub-committee may require more discussion or consensus-building activities.

Plan and distribute the agenda.

The meeting agenda is the document that defines what will be done at any particular meeting or event and it helps both leaders and participants know what to expect and how to prepare. Coordinate closely with the community's SME or Leader to help determine the agenda and the goals of the meeting. A meeting agenda should include the date, time, location, any call-in or log-in details, and a list of the items to be accomplished. Allot time segments to agenda items to help keep everyone on track. If possible, distribute the agenda in advance, but, at a minimum, review the agenda at the beginning of your meeting or event. You may want to consider using [Attachment A – Agenda](#) as a basis from which to build your full meeting agenda.

Greet your members.

A good facilitator prepares to engage with community members in meetings and events as a trusted colleague and associate. By greeting members at the door or as they log-on to a tele/video conference, you are setting the tone for the event.

State your objectives at the beginning of the event.

Unless you have a compelling reason for not stating your objectives, do so in advance of or at the beginning of the event. Members will be much better prepared to contribute and help you meet the objectives if they know what they are.

Establish community expectations.

Ground rules help participants establish appropriate ways to interact with each other during the meeting or event. Your community will likely have some norms around interaction (see [Community](#)

Common Ground Rules:

- Be here – participate!
- Stay focused.
- We invite all ideas, but not negativity.
- We respect one another.
- Only one person talking at a time.

[Expectations](#)), so there should be some basic ground rules in place. You can use these as a foundation for individual meetings or develop additional rules for special events. In any event, it is okay to review ground rules at each meeting or event – particularly those around logistics such as silencing cell phones, muting phone lines for telephone participants, and curbing side conversations. If not already established, it may be necessary to discuss the options for a decision-making process. As with the norms for participation, communities that collectively determine and agree to community ground rules will feel a sense of shared ownership and shared responsibility to ensure the rules are followed.

Guide the group in presenting and sharing information.

Your methodology may vary, but the methods you use should include all members in the discussion and prevent one or two members from dominating the dialogue. Keeping all members involved does not mean that everyone must speak, but it does mean that all members have the opportunity to be actively involved in the learning, sharing, and collaboration process.

Keep the discussion focused on the specific content.

It is easy to understand how difficult it is to stay on target sometimes, especially when we are engaged in a subject about which we are very passionate. However, it is your task to ensure this happens. If you notice the conversation heading in a direction that will not get you to your end goal, re-focus by asking probing questions or using a “parking lot” for ideas that warrant exploration at another time.

Facilitate in various environments.

For Communities of Practice, facilitators will likely be required to work with members who are distributed across geographic, organizational, and jurisdictional boundaries. You may be facilitating events and meetings that are face-to-face and in real-time where everyone who is participating can respond immediately. Or, you could be facilitating meetings and events that are not face-to-face (telephone or web conferences) and not in real-time (asynchronous), where participants can respond and make queries over a span of days or weeks. E-mail, listservs, message boards, wikis, blogs, podcasts, and many types of social networking tools are based on this asynchronous concept. In a CoP, facilitators will likely be required to translate their responsibilities, skills, and troubleshooting efforts to an online environment. If facilitating with remote participants or electronically is new to you, consider taking a continuing education course on the subject. You can also get tips on facilitating in an electronic environment by reading [“Facilitating Distributed Groups”](#) found in the Resources section.

Handle conflict in a sensitive and appropriate manner.

This includes steering members to dialogue, not debate. In a debate, participants try to convince others that they are right and bring the community around to their side. In a dialogue, participants try to understand each other and increase their learning by sharing experiences and listening to each other

actively. Productive inquiry often produces tension and your job is to ensure that tensions are adequately managed and that it produces results, not lingering discord.

Redirect dominant individuals.

Some participants exhibit behavior that is detrimental to the goals of the event. Often the behavior is not intended to be disruptive, but some individuals can dominate the discussion or take the discussion off track. It is often helpful to give dominant people tasks that can utilize their energy. It is important to ensure that you assign genuine tasks that call for a true contribution and not create contrived tasks just to keep them occupied.

Identify and intervene if a group member is acting inappropriately.

Sometimes individuals engage in behavior that has been prohibited, such as trying to control (lead) the group or being disrespectful to other participants. Group norms and ground rules are often self-regulating, but if behavior is inappropriate, it needs to be redirected. If the behavior is particularly out of hand, or if the participant continues to exhibit the difficult behavior, the facilitator may need to consult with the disruptive member “offline.”

Direct questions, misperceptions, or misinformation to the right people.

You might be in a position to address questions, misperceptions, or misinformation, but it is best to phrase the response as a question to another community leader who also has the expertise. You might also put the question to the group for clarification or discussion.

Paraphrase and synthesize ideas and summarize the discussion.

This includes documenting ideas for the group to review on a flipchart or a white board (usually with the assistance from a note taker). Be sensitive to the power contained in a pen (literal or otherwise); if you are documenting, it is important to get down all the ideas or points – not just the ones of which you approve. By documenting everyone’s point, you validate their participation if not their point of view. You can also use a simple log to document a running discussion. Consider having your note taker use the [Attachment B – Discussion Log](#) as a way to capture all the discussion items.

Provide closure and reiterate action items.

As part of assuring that all ideas and points are captured accurately, it is also the role of the facilitator to ensure that action items are noted and that follow-up on the item is assigned to someone. A facilitator also needs to work with other CoP leaders to ensure that the action items have been addressed in a timely manner. By ensuring that things get done, you will gain credibility among and trust from community members. Consider using [Attachment C – Follow-Up Item Log](#) as a way to track action items, particularly over time.

Solicit feedback on community meetings and events.

The health of the community, in part, will be expressed in how satisfied people are with meetings and events. You should conduct both informal and formal assessments to get a sense of what people are feeling. In longer meetings or events, do a “touch-base” with members to determine if they are still satisfied with the ground rules, the agenda, and the tempo and tone of the meeting. If there is a problem, don’t wait to fix it – the meeting belongs to the community. Additionally, you may want to use the template in [Attachment D – Meeting Feedback](#) to do an end-meeting process evaluation.

4. What Do I Do? Some Trouble-Shooting Tips

As a facilitator, you may be required to provide intervention to keep the event on track and obtain optimal productivity. Listed below are some tips for intervening in particular circumstances.

- **Staying on-task and on-time.** Your community may have a lot to get accomplished in a short amount of time. With groups of passionate and knowledgeable people, it is easy to veer off onto

other topics or easily get side-tracked by minute details of a conversation. In order to help the group stay focused, you may want to:

- **Remind the group of the “keep focused” ground rule.** Suggest that pertinent items be added to the Parking Lot and ensure that you will follow-up after the meeting.
- **Don’t be afraid to directly re-focus the group on the particular agenda item.** “I’d like to remind the group that we were discussing X and not Y. Can we please hold discussion on other items until later in the agenda?”
- **Try to close the item.** Remind the community of the time allotted for the item, the time utilized, and the goal of closing within the time allowed. Attempt closure of the item by determining if further discussion is needed, what needs to happen to close the item, or any barriers that are preventing closure.
- **Let the community decide.** Even with appropriate planning, we don’t always give sufficient time to deal with an issue. Additionally, with passionate and creative groups, going down other trails can eventually be productive. Give the community a choice on how to use their time in a meeting or an event. You might want to ask: “Is this item more important than the remaining items on the agenda?” If the answer is yes, determine when the other items will be addressed.

Dealing with unproductive behavior.

Difficult behavior is often unintentional or stems from an emotionally charged situation. You might be dealing with inattentive members who are engaging in behavior that is not productive for or even disruptive to the meeting. You might also be dealing with personal agendas or disrespectful behavior. Progressive intervention will most often assist you in dealing with behavior that does not help the community progress toward meeting its goals or objectives.

- **Use gentle and appropriate humor for redirection.** Depending on the tone of the meeting or event, it may be appropriate to use humor to redirect an individual or the community. This calls attention to the situation, but acknowledges that the behavior may be unintentional. By making light of the behavior, you can remind the group of the ground rules without over-emphasizing the problem.
- **Restate the ground rules directly.** If there is one individual or a small group who is exhibiting inappropriate behavior, make eye contact and note, “Our ground rules state thatwe will have one conversation at a time, we welcome all ideas, but not negativity, we will place these types of items in a parking lot, etc.”
- **Make personalized queries.** It is often difficult for members to separate personal agendas from the community’s learning agenda. Request that members relate their concerns to the group agenda. Use queries such as: “Bob, can you tell us how that relates to the topic at hand?” or “Jane, could you clarify how the community can turn that into an actionable item?”
- **Seek help from the group.** Particularly when a community has established norms and mores, the group can help regulate itself. Don’t be afraid to turn to the group for some assistance. You might want to say: “How can we help Bob with this issue?” or “How does the group at large feel about Jane’s comments?” or “Does anyone have an experience similar to Ben’s?”
- **Address the issue at a break or offline.** Being direct and honest with the individual is the best way to deal with problematic behavior. You may want to enlist the help of the leader or other leaders. You can deal with the person at a break or in-between meetings. You might want to say: “I’m concerned that your method for surfacing issues is not helping move the community’s agenda forward.” “Is there some way that the community can help you address this issue without it being a focus of our meeting?”

Stimulating productive inquiry. While passionate people often have a lot to say and suggestions for action, it is not uncommon for communities to experience lulls in an on-going conversation or a stand-still in a single event. You might want to use the following techniques to keep the conversation going.

- **Use probing questions.** You should plan to have ready a set of probing questions that relates to your community and your meeting/event objectives to stimulate the conversation. By using open-ended probing questions and employing an adequate wait time for responses, you can increase the likelihood that someone will step-up to fill any voids.
- **Call on the group.** There's nothing improper in acknowledging that your group may be in a bit of a rut. Calling on the group in face-to-face, real time meetings, or in threaded discussions can help facilitators get things going. Try suggestions like "Things seem quiet – what could we discuss?" "Should we move on from this topic? It seems like maybe we are not interested in this topic right now or maybe it is not quite a priority." The group can regulate its learning agenda itself with a little help from you.
- **Invite controversy.** Sometimes a community just needs a good fire-starter. Find a topic that can adequately engage the group because it is a "hot topic" and find an appropriate way to introduce it. Using recent articles or papers that have been published can be a way to demonstrate the topic's relevance to the community. Chances are a passionate group of members will eagerly take the bait.

References

1. Wilkinson, Michael. "Facilitation Excellence: The Seven Separators: What separates top facilitators from good ones?" at: <http://www.leadstrat.com/library/articles.asp>. July 2008.
2. Tarmiz, Halbana. Jan de Vreede, Gert. Sigurs, Ilze. 2006. "Identifying Challenges for Facilitation in Communities of Practice." Proceedings of the 39th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences
3. Good Group Decisions, Inc. 2007. "Characteristics of Good Meeting Facilitators." Good Group Decisions, Inc., 98 Maine Street, Brunswick, ME 04011. Accessed at: www.GoodGroupDecisions.com. July 2008.
4. Wilkinson, Michael. "Target Characteristics of Facilitator Candidates." available at: <http://www.leadstrat.com/library/articles.asp>. July 2008.
5. "Basic Facilitation Skills." May 2002. The Human Leadership and Development Division of the American Society for Quality, The Association for Quality and Participation, and The International Association of Facilitators.
6. "Community of Practice Design Guide A Step-by-Step Guide for Creating Collaborative Communities of Practice" Copyright © 2004, iCohere, Inc.
7. For in-depth insight into facilitation methods, consider visiting The International Association of Facilitators (IAF) at <http://www.iaf-world.org/>.

Attachment A – Agenda

1.1 MEETING TITLE / PURPOSE			
1.1.1			
1.2 LOGISTICS			
Date:		Time:	
Location:		Conference Details:	
Meeting Materials Required			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪ 			

Participants			
Facilitator:		Note taker:	
Moderator:		Other:	
Invitees:			
Objectives:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪ 		

Agenda Topics	Time	Lead

Attachment B – Discussion Log

Speaker	Time	Discussion Points	Responses	
			Respondent	Discussion
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪ 	1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪
			2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪
			3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪ 	1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪
			2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪
			3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪ 	1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪
			2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪
			3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ▪ ▪

Attachment C – Follow-Up Item Log

Action Item Description	Priority (H/M/L)	Date Added	Assigned To	Date Due	Status	Comments

Attachment D – Meeting Feedback

Please circle the appropriate response for each presentation/activity.
 1=Excellent, 2=Good, 3=Average, 4=Fair

Discussion or Activity 1	
Name of Activity _____ <i>Facilitator's Name</i> _____	1 2 3 4
The time allotted for the activity was...	<input type="checkbox"/> Too much <input type="checkbox"/> Just right <input type="checkbox"/> Not enough
The activity provided....	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree

Discussion or Activity 2	
Name of Activity _____ <i>Facilitator's Name</i> _____	1 2 3 4
The time allotted for the activity was...	<input type="checkbox"/> Too much <input type="checkbox"/> Just right <input type="checkbox"/> Not enough
The activity provided...	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree

Working Group Session	
<i>Facilitator's Name</i> _____ The facilitator managed the session well.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree
Our group met the goal of our session.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree
I felt that my input was valued.	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree

	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree
My expertise was appropriate to contribute to this discussion.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat
The time allotted for this session was...	<input type="checkbox"/> Too much <input type="checkbox"/> Just Right <input type="checkbox"/> Not enough

Meeting Logistics		
	Yes	No
Were there enough breaks?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Was the meeting run on-time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did the room arrangement facilitate discussion?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Were you provided with all of the needed materials?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
What did you like best about the meeting?		
What did you like least about the meeting?		
Additional Comments:		