

Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy Kansas State University



ICDD's Ground Rules for Public Discussion

- Seek understanding and common ground
- Expect and explore conflicting viewpoints
- Give everyone opportunity to speak
- Listen respectfully and thoughtfully
- Appreciate communication differences
- Stay focused on issues
- Respect time limits

Fundamental Facilitation Skills

A facilitator supports a group to do its best thinking by encouraging full participation, promoting mutual understanding, fostering inclusive solutions, and teaching new thinking skills. In order to perform these functions effectively, there are a number of basic skills and methods a facilitator should have, and continually improve upon, in their behavioral repertoire.

Paraphrasing – This fundamental listening skill clarifies and calms a speaker. It helps people feel their ideas are being heard (validates worth) and understood (checks accuracy of intended message). Preface paraphrase, e.g., “It sounds like what you are saying is...” or “Let me see if I am understanding your...” Then test the inference, “Is that what you were saying or did I get it wrong?”

Courageous listening to draw people out – This is the art of holding the uncertain balance between yourself and the speaker as you explore what their idea is about. Testing inferences generates valid information that you can use to make informed choices. This is a particularly helpful skill when someone is having difficulty clarifying an idea or when someone thinks s/he is being clear, but the thought is actually vague or confusing to the listeners. Ask an open-ended question that allows the speaker to elaborate on her/his experience and allows the facilitator to check their inferences about the communication, such as, “Can you say more about that?” or “What do you mean by...?”

Brainstorming – This skill allows the facilitator to gather ideas for possible solutions. Ask for many ideas, not quality ideas. Do not clarify or ask for clarification. Ask group to suspend judgment of listed ideas in order to stimulate creativity. Go for “off the wall” ideas and honor all points of view. Encourage piggybacking off other’s ideas

Balancing – This skill assists members who need support in expressing views they think are minority positions. This technique helps round out a discussion by asking for other views that may be present but have not yet been expressed. Sends the message that it is acceptable for people to speak their mind, no matter what opinions they have. Examples include: “What do others think?” “Does everyone agree with this?” “Are there other ways of looking at this?”

Making space – This skill gives permission to the less verbal members of a group not to speak, but extends the opportunity if they would like to participate. Members do not speak for a variety of reasons: they are afraid of being perceived as competitive; they are new and unsure about what is and is not acceptable; they are not sure their ideas are as good as others; or, they are slower thinkers and may have trouble getting a word in edgewise. Regardless, the facilitator can make space for them to participate by:

- Being aware of the quiet members and look for signs that may indicate their desire to speak (body language, facial expressions, etc.).
- Invite them to speak, “Do you want to add anything?” “Was there an idea you wanted to express?”
- Graciously accept their decision to speak or be silent and move on.
- Hold others from jumping in or dominating by asking members to go one at a time and inviting the quiet person to go first.
- Suggest a structured go-around to give each person a chance to speak, especially if participation is very uneven.
- Door openers include: “Who else has an idea?” “Is this discussion raising questions for anyone?” “Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t spoken for a while.”
- Minimal encouragers include: “Tell me more.” “For instance...” “And?” “Go on.” “Really?”

Attentive silence – This skill gives participants the time to reflect on what they are thinking and feeling, and whether they want to express their thoughts in more depth. Be prepared to tolerate the awkward five seconds or so while members organize their thoughts into coherent communications. Provide no verbal or nonverbal feedback – just stay relaxed yet attentive. Sometimes cues, such as raising your hand, to prevent others from breaking the silence may be needed. This technique can also be used when the group is confused, agitated, or having trouble staying focused. “Let’s take a minute of silence to think what this means to each of us.”

Basic Principles of Moderating (From Hodge and Dineen, 2006)

- Remain neutral about the subject of the forum. Do not express opinions or evaluate the comments of the participants. Do not acknowledge a contribution with “Yes,” “Good,” but with “OK,” “Thank you” or other neutral words.
- Does not take on a subject matter expert role. Do not teach participants about the issue even if they make statements counter to fact.
- Focus on the approaches. When comments go astray, bring participants back to the issue framework. Make sure that each approach receives equal consideration.
- Listen for values that motivate a participant’s comments. In deliberation, the participant’s values and motives are just as important, if not more so, than their opinion. Sometimes people with different opinions share the same motive or value and that can form the basis for their common ground.
- Intervenes as necessary. If the conversation begins to focus on personalities rather than issues, gently remind the group of ground rules or refocus the discussion back to the issues.
- Asks clarifying questions, if necessary. If you are not sure what a participant means, chances are good that others are also unclear. You may ask them to clarify what they are trying to say and ask if you have understood correctly if absolutely, but be aware that people can get the impression that they aren’t being articulate.
- Encourages everyone to join in the conversation. But be careful. Comments like “that’s a good idea” may make the speaker feel welcome in the conversation, but participants who disagree may think you are being biased.
- Asks thoughtful and probing questions to surface costs and consequences. Make sure that the participants have considered the potential outcome of their comments. Help draw out what people are willing to accept and are not willing to accept.
- Helps participants find common ground. Participants will not always agree and may sometimes be in direct conflict with each other. Recognize it and seek to focus on “What can we do together even if we don’t fully agree.”
- Encourages deep reflection. Ask participants to share why they feel a particular way or what in particular about the issue (or approach) is important to them.