

BUILDING FACILITATION SKILLS

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Summary

This fact sheet discusses what facilitation is, what the skills and responsibilities of a facilitator are, and simple tools to support facilitation. Facilitation skills are important because they support community involvement and inclusivity throughout the planning process.

Keywords:

community engagement, communication tools, reporting back, collecting data, managing the process, direction setting



Figure 1 | Community Engagement Session.

Source (Bradd, Sam and Brown, Stina. "Climate Justice Conversations Using Graphic Recording." Digital image. International Forum of Visual Practitioners. no date. Accessed January 22, 2019, <https://www.ifvp.org/users/sam-bradd>) Used with permission.

What Is Facilitation?

Facilitation is the process of guiding community gatherings to encourage productivity and engagement. Facilitation is about making discussions inclusive, positive, targeted, and effective. Facilitation skills can be used at meetings, workshops, or open houses. Effective facilitation can be done with groups of three people, or several hundred, although the specific strategies or activities used may vary.

Who Should Facilitate?

Planning team members, Elders, community members, and community leaders can all be facilitators. A facilitator can be a single individual or two or more people can be co-facilitators.

What Makes a Good Facilitator?

Unlike a meeting chair, a facilitator guides discussion but does not lead.¹ A facilitator is interested in how people participate in the discussion, not simply what is accomplished. A facilitator is neutral and never shares their opinion.

Some of the skills of a good facilitator are:²

- Communication and Presentation Skills
- Active Listening and Good Questioning
- Time-Keeping
- Flexibility
- Objectivity
- Sensitivity to Group Dynamics
- Conflict Resolution



Figure 2 | Strategic Planning Session.

Source (photo by author. "Facilitator Kemlin Nembhard leads Strategic Planning Session". Digital image. January 27, 2019.) Used with permission.

What Are The Facilitator's Responsibilities?³

Plan Ahead – Facilitators don't 'wing it'. Give yourself lots of time to determine the goals and objectives of the meeting, find a suitable time and place to hold the event, and design activities, discussions, and questions that will elicit the information required. Time spent planning the process will be rewarded with community buy-in and better quality data.

Get the Word Out – Promotion is key to a well-attended event. Consider who the community members and stakeholders are, and what the best methods to reach them are. There are many common methods, such as social media, posters, band websites, word-of-mouth, and door-knocking. Unconventional methods, such as community vision contests for youth, visiting mobility-impaired individuals directly, or hosting gatherings in conjunction with other community activities, can lead to a better turn-out.

Prepare the Meeting Space – Hold the gathering at a time and place that will enable the majority of community members to attend. Pick a location where participants will feel comfortable visiting. Offer childcare in an adjoining room or involve children in the process. Make the space as inviting as possible, by offering places to sit, and refreshments. Arrive at the space well-ahead of time to allow lots of time to set up before participants arrive. If you are using audio-visual equipment, check it ahead of time to make sure it's working.



Figure 3 | Tsuu T'ina Nation CCP Engagement Session.

Source (Dillon Consulting. "Comprehensive Community Plan - Alberta." Digital image. Dillon Consulting. no date. Accessed January 22, 2019, <http://www.dillon.ca/projects/project-details/comprehensive-community-plan---alberta>)

Welcome Participants – Start the event by welcoming all participants, and introducing members of the planning team, Elders, Chief and Council, and/or guests. Depending upon the size of the group, around-the-table introductions or an icebreaker activity can be used. A smudge or prayer can also be shared. Make sure to track event participation by having a sign-in sheet. Space can also be provided on the sign-in sheet, for participants to provide contact information so they can be invited to the next event.

Outline the Agenda – A clear agenda can help keep the event on track. Outline the agenda to participants at the beginning of the meeting so that they know what to expect. Make sure to allow time for breaks, especially during a longer event. Let people know where amenities are located, such as washrooms, snacks, or water.

Set Ground Rules – Outline the rules of participation before you start so that participants know what is expected of them. Either use community protocol to establish these or have participants identify the rules themselves, while you record them on a flipchart. Post the sheet on the wall throughout the meeting.

Common rules include:

- Turn your phone off or on vibrate.
- One person speaks at a time.
- Do not interrupt others.
- Listen to others, and try to understand where people are coming from.
- Do not mock or attack other people's ideas.
- Be on time when returning from breaks.
- If you have to leave early, or leave the room, do so in a way that does not disrupt others.

Guide Discussion and Keep Participants on Track – This is the most challenging step in the facilitation process. Keep the agenda, goals and objectives close at hand, and refer to them when needed. Use discussion questions, break-out groups, and/or activities to help guide and focus discussion. Plan what you will do to engage quieter participants, and respectfully respond to dominant voices. Have a strategy to respond to conflict.

Summarize the Meeting and Thank Participants – Bring closure to each discussion. At the end of the meeting, summarize the conversation or results, and allow time for any concluding thoughts. Thank all of the participants and hosts for their time, their valuable opinions, and for making the gathering a success.

For ideas, see the *Celebrating Success* fact sheet.

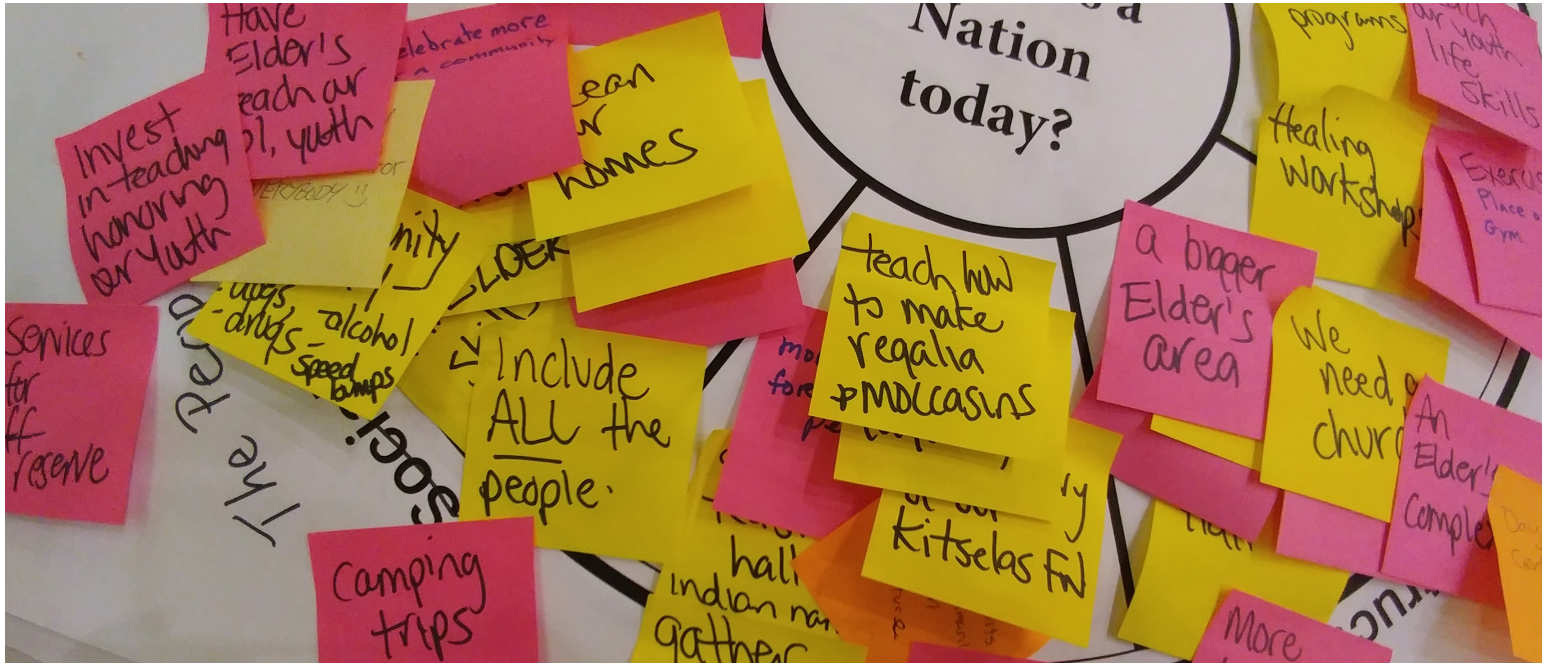


Figure 4 | Kitselas First Nation CCP Engagement Session.

Source (Meraki Community Planning. "Kitselas First Nation CCP Communications and Engagement Strategy." Digital image. Meraki Community Planning. no date. Accessed January 22, 2019, <https://merakiplanning.ca/kitselas-first-nation-comprehensive-community-plan/>) Used with permission.

Simple Facilitation Tools

Post-it Notes, Flip-Chart Paper, Coloured Markers

Having the right supplies can help an event run smoothly. Post-it notes can be used by participants to identify concerns or ideas in a community mapping exercise, or to identify priorities on a timeline. Flip-Chart paper can be used by the facilitator to document a large group discussion, or by participants to record break-out group discussions. Markers are a fun way to categorize ideas, or encourage participants to sketch things out. Remember to save all the notes created by participants for the data analysis phase.

For information on data analysis,
see the *Analyzing Surveys* fact sheet.

Pictures, Maps, Drawings, Lego

Visual aids can help stimulate discussion. Visual aids can include maps of the community, pictures of planning events and actions completed so far, drawings of community member's visions for their community, or Lego for participants to demonstrate ideas. These kinds of tools can help participants visualize what's possible. Many fruitful group activities can be built around the use of visual aids.

For information on using visual aids,
see the *Mapping Community Assets*, *Developing the Vision Statement*, and *Communicating Ideas Using Visual Aids* fact sheets.

Break-out Groups

With a large group, or a group with dominant voices, breaking up into small groups can be a great way to make sure all participants get an opportunity to speak. Split a large group by numbering individuals or providing them with coloured stickers. Participants with the same number or colour form a group, and are provided a question or topic for discussion. Remember to bring the groups together again after to share what they have discussed.

Discussion Questions

Having some extra discussion questions on hand is a good way to ensure momentum in the conversation. When there is a lull in discussion, you will be able to effectively switch gears by asking a question on a new topic, or learn more by asking a related question.

Anonymous Feedback Forms

Despite your best efforts, there will always be individuals who have burning thoughts, but don't feel comfortable sharing them in the meeting. Having an opportunity for community members to write down any remaining questions or concerns, and submit them to the planning team anonymously, can help make sure that all voices are heard, even when the discussion includes sensitive topics.



Figure 5 | Indigenous & Northern Affairs Canada CCP Workshop (Yukon)

Source (INAC. "Yukon CCP and Proposal-Writing Workshop." Digital image. Flickr. February 8, 2017. Accessed January 22, 2019, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/aandcanada/33821255522>)

Final Thoughts

Effective facilitation supports data collection and community engagement. It can help community members see the value of participating in the planning process, and increase participation. Since a facilitated meeting is planned, guided and well-organized, the information gathered reflects these qualities. This makes data analysis easier as well, and information can be more easily translated into goals and objectives.

Facilitation skills can also be used in community meetings during the implementation and evaluation phases of the planning process.

Further Reading

Community Toolbox by the Centre for Community Health and Development

Chapter 16: Group Facilitation and Problem-Solving provides an overview of meeting and facilitation skills, tips for recording meetings, and techniques for leading group discussions.

<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/group-facilitation>

Facilitating Meetings: A Guide for Community Planning Groups by the Academy for Educational Development and Centre for Community-Based Health Strategies

This guide provides an overview of facilitation skills, guidelines for dealing with conflict, and check-lists to help guide you through the process. A list of useful additional resources is included.

http://preventiontrainingservices.com/resources/Facilitating%20Meetings%20version_2005.pdf

Facilitator's Guide to Effective Workshops by the Ontario Native Women's Association

This guide discusses facilitation skills, ice breaker and energizer activities, responding to group dynamics, and tools to evaluate workshops. Consideration is also given as to how Elders and cultural practices can be integrated in the facilitation process.

<http://www.onwa.ca/upload/documents/facilitators-manual-vol-1.pdf>

Endnotes

- 1 Marya Axner, "Section 2: Developing Facilitation Skills," *Centre for Community Health and Development*, 2018. Accessed January 22, 2019.
- 2 Academy for Educational Development and Center for Community-Based Health Strategies, "Facilitating Meetings: A Guide for Community Planning Groups," *Academy for Educational Development and Center for Community-Based Health Strategies*, 2005. Accessed January 22, 2019. http://preventiontrainingservices.com/resources/Facilitating%20Meetings%20version_2005.pdf
- 3 Marya Axner, 2018.