Guide to Facilitation

Roles of Facilitators

The following materials were designed to assist you in your role as facilitator of the research mentor training curriculum. Specifically, these materials will help you to guide the mentors during training sessions as they work through their thoughts and ideas and engage in self-reflection and shared discovery. Importantly, your role is not to teach others how to mentor, but rather to guide them. As a facilitator, your role is to:

- **Make it safe:** Take time to tell the group members that the research mentor training sessions are a safe place to be honest about their ideas and feelings. Reinforce the expectation of discretion; what is shared within the group should stay within the group.

- **Keep it constructive and positive:** Remind members of your group to keep things affirmative and constructive, even when discussing difficult issues. Ask the group how they want to deal with negativity and pointless venting. Remind them the training is about working together to learn, not complaining about the current situation or discounting the contributions of others in the interest of a personal agenda.

- **Make the discussion functional:** At the start of each session, explain the goals of the session to the group. Try to keep the group on task without rushing them. If the conversation begins to move beyond the main topic, bring the discussion back to the main theme of the session.

- **Give members of the group functional roles and responsibilities:** Assign or ask for volunteers to take notes, keep track of time, and report to the larger group at the end of the session. Functional roles help keep participants engaged.

- **Give all participants a voice:** In a group, there are likely to be issues of intimidation and power dynamics that allow certain members of the group to dominate while others remain silent. At the start of the conversation, mention that the group is mixed by design, and point out that a diversity of perspectives is an essential part of the process. Remind group members to share their ideas, to respect all levels of experience, and to encourage others to participate. It’s important that everyone’s voice is heard.
General Notes on Facilitating a Group

Each group will take on its own feel and personality based on the people in the group, the facilitator’s approach, and a host of external factors beyond your control. It helps if, for your own thinking, you adopt a no fault clause stating that if a group is not working well, it is through no fault of a single individual, but rather a set of circumstances. It’s hard to not take it personally if a group doesn’t function well, but remember, you are just one part of the whole dynamic.

It also helps if you are able to release your expectations for how a meeting or group should go, and instead focus on core aspects of the process. Your role as facilitator is to be intentional and explicit, while remaining flexible and not overly prescriptive. You can only do so much as a facilitator – to a large extent it is up to the participants to take ownership of their own learning, especially since this training is designed for adults who already have advanced degrees. Individual ownership, self-reflection, and shared discovery and learning will promote the deepest learning for this particular type of program.

As challenges and normal group dynamics surface, the group will look to you to fix problems. But part of your role is to help others see that they are also responsible for addressing problems. You can help them realize this by holding on tightly to the following core ideas of group dynamics (and periodically reminding the team of them):

- Respectful interactions (listening, non-judging, non-dominating, genuine questioning, constructive responses etc.) are essential.
- Relevant tangents that tie back to a central topic, issue, or question are fine, but don’t let them derail the central purpose of the discussion.
- You need to keep moving ahead, but there is no need to push the schedule if the group needs time to reflect or slow down. If you slow down or skip something, you can anticipate participants will feel they are behind or missing out. Reassure them this is normal, the initial schedule is only a guide, and there will be time to revisit topics as needed.
- If you try something and it doesn’t go well, don’t abandon it right away. Step back and think about what went wrong, talk to the group, learn from it, and try it again. It often takes a time or two to get the group warmed up to something new.
- Discomfort and silence are ok, but be clear about the context and purpose. Silence may seem like a waste of time in meetings, but it gives people a chance to think, digest, and reflect. Allow for a few silent breaks before, during, and at the end of each meeting.
- Make it easy, rewarding, and fun for people to participate, and encourage others to do the same for each other. Simple things like friendly reminders of meetings, providing coffee, tea, or snacks, and follow-up calls to check in with someone if they miss a meeting all send the message that you care and want to make it easy for individuals to participate.

Adapted from the Creating a Collaborative Learning Guidebook, Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning:
Group Dynamics:
Suggestions for How to Handle Challenges

What do I do when no one talks?
- Have everyone write an idea or answer to a question on a piece of paper and toss it in the middle of the table. Each participant then draws a piece of paper from the center of the table (excluding their own) and reads it out loud. All ideas are read out loud before any open discussion begins.
- Have participants discuss a topic in pairs for three to five minutes before opening the discussion to the larger group.
- Ask the group: “This topic seems challenging for us…why do you think that is?”

What do I do when one person is dominating the conversation?
- Use a talking stone to guide the discussion. Participants may only talk when holding the stone. Each person in the group is given a chance to speak before anyone else can have a second turn with the stone. Participants may pass if they choose not to talk. Importantly, each person holding the stone should share their own ideas and resist responding to someone else’s ideas. Generally once everyone has a chance to speak, the group can move into open discussion without the stone.
- Use the Constructive/Destructive Group Behaviors Exercise (see below). Each participant chooses their most constructive and destructive group behavior from a list. Each person writes the two behaviors on the back of their table tent. Then, participants share their choice with the larger group and explain why they chose those behaviors. This exercise also helps provide the group with a vocabulary so they may name these behaviors as they later note them in themselves and others. It provides a light hearted and nonthreatening way that they can help each other stay on track.
- Acknowledge the contributions of the person dominating the conversation but then say that you would like to hear another's view or thoughts before moving on. Try to be comfortable with silence until another person speaks up.

What do I do when the group members direct all their questions and comments to me, instead of their fellow group members?
- Each time a group member talks to you, move your eye contact to someone else in the group to help the speaker direct their attention elsewhere.
- Ask the participants for help in resolving one of your mentoring challenges. For example, ask them for advice on how to deal with an apathetic mentee. This helps the group members stop looking to you for the right answers and redirects the problem-solving and discussion focus to the entire group.

What do I do when a certain person never talks?
- Have a different participant initiate each day’s discussion so that different people have the chance to speak first during the week.
- Assign participants in the group different roles in a scenario or case study and ask them to consider the case from a certain perspective. Ask the participants to discuss the case in the larger group from the various perspectives. For example, some participants could consider the perspective of the mentee, while others consider the perspective of the mentor.
- Try smaller group discussions (two to three participants per group) as individuals may feel more comfortable talking in smaller groups or without certain other individuals present.
- Outside of the session, speak with the person about what you are observing and inquire about whether you can assist with making participation easier.
What do I do when the group gets off topic?

- Have everyone write the ideas they want to share on a given topic for three minutes. This short writing time will help participants collect their ideas and decide what thoughts they would most like to share with the group so they can focus on that point.
- Ask someone to take notes and recap the discussion at the half-way and end points of the session to keep the conversation focused.

Constructive and Destructive Group Behaviors

Constructive Group Behaviors

*Cooperating:* Is interested in the views and perspectives of other group members and willing to adapt for the good of the group.

*Clarifying:* Makes issues clear for the group by listening, summarizing, and focusing discussions.

*Inspiring:* Enlivens the group, encourages participation and progress.

*Harmonizing:* Encourages group cohesion and collaboration. For example, uses humor as relief after a particularly difficult discussion.

*Risk Taking:* Is willing to risk possible personal loss or embarrassment for success of the overall group or project.

*Process Checking:* Questions the group on process issues such as agenda, time frames, discussion topics, decision methods, use of information, etc.

Destructive Group Behaviors

*Dominating:* Uses most of the meeting time to express personal views and opinions. Tries to take control by use of power, time, etc.

*Rushing:* Encourages the group to move on before task is complete. Gets tired of listening to others and working with the group.

*Withdrawing:* Removes self from discussions or decision making. Refuses to participate.

*Discounting:* Disregards or minimizes group or individual ideas or suggestions. Severe discounting behavior includes insults, which are often in the form of jokes.

*Digressing:* Rambles, tells stories, and takes group away from primary purpose.

*Blocking:* Impedes group progress by obstructing all ideas and suggestions. "That will never work because…"

Adapted from Brunt (1993). Facilitation Skills for Quality Improvement.

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