

Effective Facilitation: Tips for improving skills and engaging audiences

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Getting the most out of marriage and family skill building classes requires more than a good curriculum. Having an effective facilitator is the key to a successful program. A good facilitator is the leader of the class, is invested in the outcomes and the mission of the class, and is knowledgeable about process and course content. It takes time, effort, and practice to become a great facilitator. In addition to knowing the curriculum, there are a number of skills a facilitator can use in a variety of settings and situations.

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There are three basic principles for becoming an effective facilitator.

- 1) A facilitator is a guide, who helps people become engaged in the classes and ultimately learn and use new skills.
- 2) A facilitator focuses on how people participate in the process of learning, not just the content of the class. This requires the facilitator to understand the needs of the group and keep the group on task while at the same time being flexible. A great facilitator encourages all members to participate appropriately and manages difficult people.

- 3) The final principle is that good facilitators are very competent in the subject matter, but also recognize that they are not the only expert in the room. Effective facilitators understand that the participants have a wide variety of life experiences and collective knowledge they can draw upon. Effective facilitators establish credibility with the group as they share their expert knowledge while encouraging participants to share their own experiences, creating an engaging learning environment.

Some curricula provide strategies for facilitation. Some people learn to facilitate over years of trial and error. Other people have taken courses on public speaking and facilitation. In other words, being an effective facilitator takes training and preparation. Below are some tips to help you become the best facilitator you can be:

- **First impressions count** - Dress appropriately and smile. Portray self-confidence. Greet each member as they come into class and make a personal connection. This creates a welcoming environment.



- **Be a good listener** - You can't expect participants to develop good listening skills without modeling the behavior yourself. When communicating with participants, facilitators should model turn-taking and reflective listening skills.
- **Encourage an atmosphere of acceptance and mutual respect for group members** - Demonstrate acceptance and respect as you interact with participants. Collaborate with class members to create "ground rules" that govern participation. Encourage them to include rules that ensure everyone is treated with acceptance and respect. When necessary, don't hesitate to enforce those rules. Participants learn best in an environment where they feel emotionally safe and are unafraid to ask questions and share their opinions.
- **Know your audience** - Good facilitators provide information that is relevant to their audience and share personal experiences when appropriate. An effective facilitator is culturally competent and will augment or adapt material if some parts of the curricula aren't culturally appropriate.
- **Be prepared and organized** - Plan to spend time preparing for your workshop and make sure you have all of your materials ready. Be sure that you have a backup plan if you rely on technology. Ensure that your plan is flexible enough to allow for participant comments and questions. Identify places in the curriculum where you can ask people to comment on what they have just heard. You will not want to cut off an interactive discussion because your plan did not allow time for participant engagement.
- **Ensure that the physical environment is conducive to participation** - Having a group set up in a semi-circle is an ideal way to facilitate com-

munication and connection. If tables are needed, be sure they are set up in a way to encourage group participation. Avoid rows. Avoid podiums at all costs!

- **Be yourself** - Use jokes and humor if that comes naturally to you or use examples or stories that you have heard/read that touched you. Personalizing the information in your own way can be effective at building a relationship with your group.
- **Use "icebreakers" to help participants get to know each other and to create a fun atmosphere** - It is a good idea to have a couple of simple "get to know you" icebreakers. Simple

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icebreakers not only help people to learn names and some basic information but also allow the group to feel comfortable with each other. While a basic icebreaker is not likely to be directly linked to the educational goals of the curriculum, they are important in setting the tone of the group. Icebreakers are a prelude to building group cohesion and emotional safety.

- **Use specific experiential exercises to build group cohesion and to illustrate important ideas and concepts** - For example, if the curriculum includes topics such as communication, trust building or conflict management; be sure to have a variety of activities that will help reinforce these concepts in a meaningful way. Be sure that the exercises are culturally, age and gender appropriate. Most icebreakers and activities can be easily adapted to the specific characteristics of the group.

- **Learning takes place on two levels: cognitive and affective** - What does this mean? When a person learns how to work through a complicated algebraic equation that is an example of cognitive learning, it has to do with how a person thinks. How a person feels when they read the statement “complicated algebraic equation” is what is referred to as “affective” learning. Participants need cognitive information to make choices about significant life changes, while affective or emotional learning motivates people to maintain these changes.

- **Be knowledgeable about adult learning styles** - Primary learning styles are visual, auditory and kinesthetic. Visual learners tend to learn best when concepts or ideas are conveyed graphically or are reinforced with images or video. Auditory learners tend to learn well when information is delivered orally, such as in a lecture or speech. Kinesthetic learners tend to learn by doing, rather than by just listening or observing. Great facilitators make sure they present their curricula using a variety of methods that will engage all participants, regardless of their learning style.

- **Have an array of video-clips from movies and TV to illustrate concepts (and to give facilitators a break!)** - Develop a library of clips on topics such as commitment, conflict, gender differences and other relevant topics. Some suggestions include clips from “The Story of Us”, “Parenthood”, “City Slickers”, “Everyone Loves Raymond” and “War of the Roses”.

- **Understand the importance of nonverbal communication** - Be sure that the way you sit or stand, your tone of voice, and your facial expressions match your message. Participants will only mirror back the level of enthusiasm for the topic they see expressed by the facilitator. Make sure

to position yourself in a way that you can easily engage and work with the group. Strong facilitators also pay close attention to the nonverbal communication of participants. Are participants engaged? Are they looking at and listening to you? Or, are they confused, distracted, or uninterested? Learn to read the nonverbal communication of the group and be responsive to what you see. You may need to adjust the pace of the presentation, change the sequence of some of the activities you have planned, take a break, or clarify some of the concepts you are teaching. Be sure to walk around and make eye contact with participants.

- **Be prepared to deal with difficult people** - Difficult people can be “challengers”, “know-it-alls”, “off-task”, “negative”, “disruptors” or “distracters.” The facilitator needs to be comfortable re-directing these people and needs to be prepared to gently confront their behavior outside of the class or in the class if necessary.

- **Start and end each session with an opportunity for people to share what they learned or how they have used the skills** - A ritual of sharing can encourage group cohesion and give people something to look forward to at the start of each workshop. Similarly, by summarizing key learning concepts at the end of each class and wrap up the session with a homework assignment that will continue the learning process until the next session. These skills are only effective if people use them at home, and “homework” assignments support that goal. Be sure to thank each person for their participation and time and to encourage them to return.

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