

The logo for SOVA Facilitation Guide. The word "SOVA" is in a green, sans-serif font. The letter "O" is replaced by a circular emblem containing a brown owl perched on a branch with a single green leaf. Below "SOVA", the words "FACILITATION" and "GUIDE" are stacked in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

# SOVA FACILITATION GUIDE

A background image showing a stack of hands from people of various ethnicities, including dark-skinned and light-skinned individuals, with their fingers interlaced in a supportive gesture.

Facilitating Collaborative Problem Solving:  
*A Primer*



Effective facilitation is about supporting a productive, respectful conversation that helps participants understand issues at a deeper level and expand the common ground from which they can work collaboratively. The quality of facilitation can make or break your work. Unfortunately, some people who are likely to self-identify as strong facilitators may not have the qualities necessary for effective facilitation of collaborative dialogues. The facilitators of difficult conversations must be credible, sufficiently neutral, and able to create environments that allow faculty and staff to be candid or critical.

Regardless of any specific goals, deliberative conversations always begin with clear goals that are understood by all, and transparency about what the outcome of the conversation will be (how the information will be used, what further opportunities participants will have to weigh in, etc.). Once the facilitator clarifies the goals and intended outcomes of the conversation, he or she should open the dialogue with a starting question. From that point on, the facilitator must both listen carefully to what is being said and plan her or his next move.

This primer provides guidance on the basic responsibilities, characteristics, and techniques of successful facilitators. No single person possesses all the characteristics described here; instead, we encourage facilitators to be aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses. The Recipe for a Great Moderator provided below can serve as a useful self-assessment tool for facilitators looking to improve their skills over time.

## Responsibilities, Characteristics, and Techniques of the Effective Facilitator

Adapted from Michael Wilkinson, "The Secrets of Facilitation" (Jossey-Bass, 2004)

### Main Responsibilities of a Facilitator

**Motivator:** From the rousing opening statement to the closing words of cheer, you must ignite a fire within the group, establish momentum, and keep up the pace.

**Guide:** You must know the steps of the process the group will execute from the beginning to the end. You must carefully guide the participants through each of the steps.

**Questioner:** You must listen carefully to the discussion and be able to quickly analyze and compare comments and formulate questions that help manage the group discussion.

**Bridge Builder:** You must create and maintain a safe and open environment for sharing ideas. Where other people see differences, you must find and use similarities to establish a foundation for building bridges to consensus.

**Peacemaker:** Direct confrontation between participants is always a possibility. You must be ready to step in, calm the participants, and direct the group toward a constructive resolution.

**Taskmaster:** You are ultimately responsible for keeping the session on track, and for achieving the session goals.





## Key Characteristics of an Effective Facilitator

***Manages the group well.*** Strive to find the right balance between too much and too little structure in the conversation.

***Models cooperative attitudes and skills.*** By exhibiting strong listening skills and asking good questions, you can model the behaviors you are hoping participants will show and develop.

***Does not take on an “expert” role with the subject matter.*** Your role is not to teach the participants about the issue—even if it is a subject you know very well.

***Keeps the deliberation focused and on track.*** When comments go astray, bring participants back to the goals of the session. Make sure the goals are clear, even if the conversation is wide-ranging.

***Intervenes as necessary.*** If conversation begins to focus on personalities rather than issues, gently remind the group of the discussion guidelines or refocus the dialogue on the central issue. An effective facilitator creates an atmosphere of acceptance in which all ideas are heard.

***Asks clarifying questions when necessary.*** If you are not sure what a participant means, chances are good that others are also unclear. You can ask participants to clarify their statement, then rephrase back to them what they’ve said and ask if you have understood it correctly.

***Encourages everyone to join in the conversation.*** Be careful: Comments such as “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 trade-offs and consequences.*** Make sure participants have considered the potential outcomes of their comments and ideas.

***Helps participants find common ground and identify and work through key tensions.*** Participants may sometimes be in direct conflict with each other. Helping them identify both common ground and key tensions will help move the conversation forward in important ways.

***Encourages deeper reflection.*** Ask participants to share what is important to them about the issue or why they feel a particular approach or strategy is valuable.

***Helps people prioritize their ideas for action.*** Helping people move from exploratory dialogue to concrete action is a key task of a facilitator.



## The Six Basic Facilitator Choices

When facilitating dialogue and deliberation, the facilitator has six basic "moves" at her disposal for helping keep the conversation productive, inclusive, and on track.

- 1. Ask a "reaction" question.** Reaction questions can encourage other people to respond to the last speaker's comments in some way.  
Ex. "Does anyone else have a different view?"
- 2. Ask a new starting question.** Depending on the goals of the session, you may have a specific set of questions to ask, or certain issues you want to discuss. In either case, you may sometimes want to jump in and take the conversation in a different direction. One good way to do this can be to devise a new starting question that combines or compares opinions the group has shared. Such a question may be particularly important if the conversation has gotten off track and participants need to be redirected to the issue.  
Ex. "Some people argue that one of the key issues around this topic is X. What are your thoughts on its importance?"
- 3. Let there be silence.** Often, facilitators feel pressure to keep the conversation flowing, so they are troubled by silence and seek to fill it with probing questions or a change of topic. However, sometimes the right thing to do is to sit with the silence and give people a little space to find their way to what they want to say.
- 4. Keep things moving.** Move to different speakers simply by pointing to the next person in line, or by asking the group for additional comments. People generally like to talk, so in many cases, you'll have a queue of people ready to speak and can simply move from one to another.
- 5. Paraphrase.** To clarify a speaker's point, help the recorders, and/or move the conversation to a deeper level, try paraphrasing back what the person has said to the group. Always do so in a way that makes it easy for the speaker to correct you if necessary.  
Ex. "What I'm hearing is X. Is that right?"
- 6. Ask a "probing" or "follow-up" question.** To get clarification or dig deeper, consider asking a speaker to continue their thought.  
Ex. "Why is that important to you?" or  
"Can you say more about that?"





## Basic Facilitator Practices

- **Paraphrasing** is fundamental to active listening. It is the most straightforward way to demonstrate to a speaker that her or his thoughts have been heard and understood.
- **Summarizing** is an important technique because the most interesting conversations can also be the hardest ones to close.
- **Stacking** is a procedure for helping people take turns when several people want to speak at once.
- **Tracking** means keeping track of the various lines of thought that are going on simultaneously within a single discussion.
- **Listening** for common ground is a powerful intervention when group members are polarized. It validates the group's areas of disagreement and focuses everyone on their areas of agreement. Just be careful not to overuse this strategy, or you'll end up whitewashing important disagreements that ought to be aired.
- **Intentional silence** is highly underrated. It consists of a pause, usually lasting no more than a few seconds, and it is done to give a speaker that brief extra "quiet time" to discover what he or she wants to say.
- **Validating** is the skill that legitimizes and accepts a speaker's opinion or feeling, without agreeing that the opinion is "correct."
- **Acknowledging** feelings is important because people communicate their feelings through their conduct, their language, their tone of voice, and their facial expressions—and these communications have a direct impact on anyone who receives them.
- **Making space** for a quiet person sends that person and the group the message: "If you don't wish to talk now, that's fine. But if you would like to speak, here's an opportunity."
- **Balancing** is a critical task that allows a facilitator to broaden a discussion to include perspectives that may not yet have been expressed.
- **Encouraging** is the art of creating an opening for people to participate, without putting any one individual on the spot.
- **Drawing people out** is a skill that supports people in clarifying, developing, and refining their ideas. Another version of it is helping the group see that some of their ideas contrast and merit further exploration.
- **Empathizing** is commonly defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.



# THE ART OF ACTIVE LISTENING

Adapted from the International Association of Public Participation training materials

| Behavior                         | Purpose   | Tips   | Examples  |
|----------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>Encouraging</b>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conveys interest</li><li>• Encourages the person to keep talking</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Don't agree or disagree</li><li>• Use neutral words</li><li>• Face the speaker and nod as he/she speaks</li><li>• Ask probing question</li></ul>                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "Can you tell me more?"</li><li>• "And then what happened?"</li></ul>   |
| <b>Clarifying</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensures understanding</li><li>• Avoids confusion</li><li>• Obtains additional information</li></ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ask questions</li><li>• Restate understanding</li><li>• Ask if interpretation is accurate</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "When did this happen?"</li><li>• "By impacts you mean...?"</li></ul>   |
| <b>Restating or Paraphrasing</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Shows you are listening and understanding what is being said</li><li>• Verifies meaning and interpretation of message</li></ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Restate basic ideas and your understanding of what was said in your own words</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "You would like NGE to provide materials in Spanish. Is that right?"</li><li>• "You thought this action was required at this time?"</li></ul> |
| <b>Reflecting</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Diffuses difficult situations</li><li>• Shows understanding of feelings and emotions</li><li>• Helps the speaker evaluate his/her own feelings after hearing them reflected by someone else</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reflect the speaker's basic feelings</li><li>• Be aware of the tone of your voice</li><li>• Watch body language</li><li>• Listen to his/her ideas and echo them back</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "This has really been frustrating for you."</li><li>• "You sound disappointed."</li><li>• "I hear anger in your voice."</li></ul>             |
| <b>Summarizing</b>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reviews progress</li><li>• Pulls together ideas, facts, and feelings</li><li>• Establishes closure; allows people to move on</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Restate major ideas, thoughts, and feelings</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "These seem to be the key ideas you've expressed..."</li><li>• "Your main priorities were..."</li></ul>                                       |
| <b>Validating</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Acknowledges the worthiness of the other person</li></ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Acknowledge the value of his/her issues and feelings</li><li>• Show appreciation for her/his efforts and actions</li></ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "I appreciate your willingness to resolve this issue."</li></ul>  |
| <b>Questioning</b>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gathers information</li><li>• Focuses discussion</li><li>• Expands understanding</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use open-ended questions starting with what, how, when, why, and where</li><li>• Seek specific details to help understand and clarify</li></ul>                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "How did that new road surprise you?"</li><li>• "What made you think that?"</li></ul>   |



# RECIPE FOR A GREAT MODERATOR: A SELF-ASSESSMENT

| Skill Area                | Poor (1)  | Great (10)  | Personal Score (1–10) | Adaptation Strategies |
|---------------------------|---|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Listening</b>          | Inability to hear what others are saying and to track the line of thought being expressed or pick up on the subtext of the conversation. Short attention span. Cuts people off mid-sentence. Distracted or closed-off body language.  | Ability to hear beyond what is being said to identify the core meaning. Can answer the questions: What does this person’s statement say about what he/she values? What is the main point he/she is trying to make? What is he/she trying to say that others might miss? |                       |                       |
| <b>Objectivity</b>        | Biased about the subject matter and groups and/ or people involved with or affected by the subject matter. Unable to refrain from commenting about the subject matter or inserting personal opinions into the conversation. Seen as having and pushing a strong position or agenda.                                 | Reflects good “behavioral neutrality” on the subject. Able to refrain from making personal comments about the subject matter. Does not reveal her/his personal position on the subject. Remains unbiased and neutral in conversation and when moderating.               |                       |                       |
| <b>Group Awareness</b>    | Poor awareness of group dynamics. Inability to read body language, including participants’ confusion, discomfort, or tuning out.  | Awareness of group dynamics, including body language. Ability to sense how participants are responding to turns in the conversation. Knows when it is time to move on in the conversation, and when to keep digging.  |                       |                       |
| <b>Responsive Control</b> | Either too controlling or insufficiently assertive. Unable to maintain an appropriate level of control of the group, to moderate the tenor of the discussion, to rein in dominant or aggressive speakers, or to elicit comments from silent participants. Intimidated or cowed by experts, politicians, or bullies. | Knows when and when not to intervene in order to reinforce ground rules and keep the conversation on track. Effectively ensures everyone has an opportunity to speak by drawing out silent participants and/or managing dominant or aggressive speakers.                |                       |                       |



# RECIPE FOR A GREAT MODERATOR: A SELF-ASSESSMENT

| Skill Area             | Poor (1)  | Great (10)  | Personal Score (1–10) | Adaptation Strategies |
|------------------------|---|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Sense of Humor</b>  | Either excessively dour or serious, or inappropriately or excessively comedic.  | Able to use humor appropriately to set a relaxed, informal tone for the conversation or to defuse a difficult or awkward situation.   |                       |                       |
| <b>Adaptability</b>    | Overly dependent on scripted, predictable environments. Does not handle last-minute changes well.                                 | Able to adapt to unexpected situations with grace and humor, while keeping the key principles and objectives in mind.   |                       |                       |
| <b>Public Speaking</b> | Poor verbal communication skills. Either intimidated by speaking in front of groups or needs to be the center of attention.       | Comfortable and eloquent when speaking in public settings. Sets a relaxed and respectful tone. Uses language appropriate for the audience. Able to verbally synthesize information. |                       |                       |
| <b>Image</b>           | Perceived as either elitist/alooof or overly charismatic. Seen as unprepared or disorganized, short-tempered, manic, or volatile. | Seen as warm, calm, approachable. Can connect with people from a wide range of backgrounds, ages, experiences, etc.   |                       |                       |

