

Facilitation Best Practices

How to run a successful OFA training

Key skills for adult learning:

“Adult learning is a voluntary process whereby self-directed individuals collaborate and practice activities that lead them to acquire or revise knowledge, skills, values and even revise their basic beliefs and assumptions.” (*Cranton, P (2006). Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning. 2nd ed., pp 02-03. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.*)

To make concepts easier to understand, and to keep a group on track towards your ultimate goals for the event, you will need to navigate complex group dynamics, so take some time to reflect on the key skills below. Make an inventory of the skills that you do well, and the skills that you may need to practice ahead of your training.

3 key principles of facilitation:

- You are a guide to the process, not the person with all of the answers.
- You focus on *how* people participate in the training over *what* gets achieved.
- You seek to create an inclusive space where everyone has a voice, but not necessarily a comfortable space (so as not to hamper individual learning and growth).

Becoming a great trainer takes practice and often requires a bit of time to grow into a new role, but it may be easier than you think. Here are some best practices to consider when preparing for your training.

Do:

- **Internalize the training material.** You will utilize the slides and annotated agenda to help you cover the most important aspects and challenges of your training. Practice, practice, practice! Make sure that you know the material inside and out so that you feel knowledgeable enough to speak confidently about it with your own voice (i.e. not scripted).
- **Know your audience.** It's not enough for your audience to know you—you need to actively work to understand them as well. Some key questions you might consider asking are: What motivates them to be here? What do they want to see happen in our community? What do they want to get out of this training?

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- **Make your audience feel safe and heard.** It's likely that you are bringing together a mixture of people—some of whom you know and some you don't. It is your responsibility as the trainer to make sure that you create a space that lets people feel comfortable enough to connect with each other, as well as with you.
- **Involve your participants actively.** While you will need to clearly communicate the concepts of the training, it is critical that your attendees feel connected to the material you're presenting. We recommend that the participants do the majority of the thinking, doing, and acting, throughout the training. Think of yourself as a guide for the group—you are setting the vision, the goal, and the agenda—but your attendees should be constructing the questions and actions that come out of the training.
- **Be flexible.** Your session has goals that you want to hit and yet, there may be times during your training where your group presents needs that you may have not even considered. A key skill for trainers is having the ability to quickly adapt to your group's needs and still hit the goals of the session.

For example, there are times when individuals within the group ask questions you don't have the answer to. Another potential difficulty is when very strongly opinionated individuals take over the conversation at the expense of the rest of the group. At other times, people within your group may disagree with each other. While these may feel overwhelming, it's important to remain calm at all times, and to always fall back on your agenda and schedule by asking folks to be respectful of each other's time.

One way to address some of these challenges might be to use a "Parking Lot" where people can write down their questions that are tangentially related to the material so that you can respond during a break or even after the training. That can work for questions you don't have the answer to or even to help bring around a conversation that may be moving away from the main topic. You have to find the balance between letting people be heard while bringing the conversation back to where you need it to be. That takes practice!

- **Model a safe, relaxed, informal environment for all of your training attendees.** Use a conversational manner of speaking, smile, and relax. Be sure to look at people you're speaking to, don't fold your arms, and keep a very open body posture.
- **Keep the discussion on target.** It's important that you're respectful of all of your attendees time by keeping the discussion to the matter at hand and managing time effectively. Ultimately, you want to make sure you're hitting the desired outcome—to educate folks about redistricting. Here are some statements you can say when things get off track:

"We seem to be off our original area of concern..."

"Does anyone object to us returning to the discussion of?"

"Where are we in relation to this agenda item?"

"You know, I don't know the answer to _____, let's put that in the parking lot for now."

"This sounds like a discussion we're not going to resolve tonight. Let's put that in the parking lot for now."

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- **As a best practice, never talk for more than 15 minutes.** It's important to ensure that you're constantly checking in and involving your attendees by asking to make sure they're on the same page, involving them in discussion about the topic, or giving them an activity to practice the training.]
- **Use encouraging body language, voice, words and give positive feedback for participating.** Keep your body position open. Make sure you're not crossing your arms. Lean into the conversation, and be sure that you're repeating your participant's points and attending to each member of your team.
- **Actively listen—even when your team isn't verbally speaking.** You'll need to be aware of your participant's reactions, whether they are verbal or non-verbal. Be sure to keep an eye out for whether your team seems to be disengaged, needs a break, or whether individuals are defensive, puzzled, confused, excited to respond appropriately and flexible. At times, you may need to say these focusing statements:

“The group seems quiet. Are we in need of a break?”

“I’m sensing some confusion—do we need to revisit X point?”

“It looks like we have a disagreement among the group. Let’s surface this to clear any misunderstandings or growth points we need as a team.”

- **Ask open-ended questions.** In order to keep a discussion going, or start a discussion, open-ended questions need to be asked so as to get your participants to think. Questions that cannot be answered by a “yes or no” spur thought, opinion, and analysis for discussions.
- **Be aware of your own archetypes, stereotypes, and biases.** As a facilitator, you should not favor any one person over another. You may lean towards arguments or ideas grounded in fact, reason, and observation—but should always encourage an open-process where everyone's voice is heard and known. Ask yourself—Who do I find myself avoiding when they want to speak? Why? Who do I find myself interrupting more?
- **Let disagreement happen.** Disagreement is natural, and as long as group values of respect and active listening are employed, makes individuals consider different perspectives. Be aware that disagreement on a discussion topic may not be resolved at your orientation, or even during this fellowship.

Don't:

- **Don't allow one person or a small group of participants to dominate the discussion.** Your role as a facilitator is crucial in keeping an open process going. To ensure everyone is included, you will need to be aware of assertive individuals with dominant ideas. We recommend saying something to this effect: “Thanks Janice! That’s a really great point. Before we explore that further, I think DeAndre has some ideas. We want to give everyone a chance to speak.”

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- **Don't allow group-think—even if you agree with it.** Similar to the above point, you need to point out when the group seems to be suppressing opposing ideas. Points of view can be dominant based on merit, but adversely can be dominant because the proponents of that point of view are aggressive in its presentation. As a facilitator, it's important to guard the discussion against dominant views that shut down other voices. Don't be afraid to point it out.
- **Don't feel the need to have all the answers or to be the expert.** Your participants are here to learn and grow in their own organizing skills and thoughts. They will need the opportunity to discuss topics and sharpen their viewpoints openly.

If you don't know the answer to a question, simply say so. If you are asked for your opinion or ideas, certainly share it. But remember not to take too much time from their

In order to improve your facilitation skills, you have to practice them.

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