



Board Leadership Calgary
2026

**FACILITATION
FUNDAMENTALS**

Supplemental Handout Package

Provided by:
Community Development Unit

Alberta 
Arts, Culture
and Status of Women

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THE NEUTRAL FACILITATOR

ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

A facilitator acts as a neutral guide, focusing on process rather than outcomes or contributing ideas. They use observations and questions to help groups reflect, recognize successes, and build on what is working, while returning responsibility to the group and reinforcing that participants have the resources they need. Facilitators support clear purpose and process, encourage participation, suggest methods when helpful, and protect individuals and their ideas.

They also create a positive and safe climate by modelling confidence, encouraging inclusion, and allowing groups to work through challenges without stepping in too quickly. Even when outcomes are incomplete, they guide debriefs that focus on learning and progress, while staying aware of their own responses and grounded in the integrity of the facilitation process.

ELEMENTS OF NEUTRAL FACILITATOR

Reminds participants of comments they shared earlier

Uses probing questions to deepen the discussion

Brings up issues that participants have not mentioned

Does not take sides

Makes everyone feel that their opinions are valid and welcome

Introduces her/himself, but does not share personal opinions or an agenda

Does not use his/her personal experiences to make a point or to get people talking

Explains his/her role

Sets a relaxed and welcoming tone

THE PRACTICE AND ART OF FACILITATION

Facilitating..

- From “facile” - easily accomplished or attained
- Facilitate - to make things easier
- To help a group do their best thinking

IS	IS NOT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process and results oriented • Fun • An art and skill • Learned by doing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directing • Endless discussion • Imposing your ideas • Biased

It is also important to know:

PRINCIPLES	GUIDELINES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no perfect way to facilitate discussion • Success does not depend on you • You develop your skills by using them • Bring energy and positivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on the same problem at the same time in the same way • Ensure the opportunity for participation is present • Deal with problems, issues and concerns • Try to achieve “operational neutrality” • Establish behaviour boundaries, if necessary • Be aware of what is going on in and around the group and take action if necessary • Ensure recording and closure

PROCESS V CONTENT

A basic facilitation principle: Facilitators are process guides, not content experts.

PROCESS	CONTENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The way the group arrives at their objective. • <u>How</u> the issue is dealt with • How members of a group work together. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What the meeting or organization is about. • <u>What</u> the issue at hand is. • i.e. decisions to make, actions required



DESIGNING FACILITATED SESSIONS

Designing a facilitation session is all about proper planning. The amount of planning needed differs according to the complexity of the project, the number of people or stakeholders involved, and if there are any anticipated conflicts or issues that may arise. Either way there are 3 things we have to consider when planning: people, process and things.

DESIGN: CONSIDERING “PEOPLE”

Be Clear About Roles and Responsibilities

Be deliberate and intentional about everyone involved including the facilitator, participants, observers, trainers, recorders, support staff and resource people. Know what they will be doing, talk to them about it and hold them accountable.

Co-Facilitation

We often don't have the luxury of facilitating with one or more team members, but when we do there are definite benefits and maybe even a few drawbacks!

Knowing Your Participants

- Consider who will be in the session and what types of people are participating, and determine when you will know this information, whether in advance or upon arrival.
- Take steps to learn about participants ahead of time, including whether they know each other, whether time is needed for introductions, and whether there are any sensitivities or dynamics to be aware of as the facilitator.
- Involve and inform participants during the planning process as much as possible to reduce surprises during the session.
- Communicate key details in advance, including date, time, location, agenda, objectives or outcomes, and any logistical information such as meals or parking, so participants feel prepared.
- Use opening remarks to establish clear ground rules or working agreements to support positive group dynamics throughout the session.

DESIGN: CONSIDERING “PROCESS”

Outcomes

- The most important part of planning and designing a session is being clear on the desired outcomes.
- Once outcomes are defined, the process and other elements will follow.
- In facilitated training, clear learning objectives help guide the selection of effective activities.
- Different types of sessions (input gathering, decision-making, discussion, etc.) require different outcomes.
- Clearly state tangible outcomes upfront so participants understand the purpose.
- Use purpose and outcomes to keep the session focused and on track.

Designing and Asking the Right Questions

- Questioning is a facilitator's most powerful tool. It is flexible, encourages participation, and drives discussion, but requires forethought and practice.
- Once purpose and outcomes are clear, it becomes easier to design the right questions.
- Anticipate how participants may respond and test questions to ensure they lead to the desired results.
- Avoid leading questions and trust that the group holds the wisdom.
- Ask the question, then step back and let the group respond.

Timing

- Ensure there is enough time to achieve the desired outcomes. Avoid designing sessions only to fit the time available at the expense of quality.
- If time is limited, either request more time or adjust the outcomes and process accordingly.
- Plan activities with timing in mind, including energy and focus at different points such as the beginning of the day, after lunch, and the end of the day.

DESIGN: CONSIDERING "THINGS"

"Physical" Logistical Considerations

The physical environment shapes how participants engage, so room setup should align with the session's purpose. Consider wall space, lighting, noise, airflow, temperature, food, breakout areas, and seating arrangements, as these all influence participation and group dynamics.

Meeting Room Design

- Different setups support different types of interaction (e.g., theatre, classroom, banquet, conference, U-shape).
- Choose the design based on your desired outcomes.
- Be intentional, as setup signals expectations and shapes engagement.

Materials, Supplies, and Preparation

Bring materials that support your process and ensure consistency.

- Flipcharts and quality paper
- Markers (non-toxic, low bleed)
- Poster tack or tape
- Post-it notes and index cards
- Extra pens, paper, and small supplies (e.g., elastics, clips)
- Use props purposefully, they can enhance or distract.
- Bring extra copies of process notes and participant agendas.

Final Checks and Coordination

- Confirm materials: nametags, handouts, flipcharts, AV equipment, slides and backups, directions and resources
- Confirm with client: contact info, location, timing, access, and final headcount

GROUP GUIDELINES

Group guidelines or working principles are the parameters that participants agree to honor and follow. Group guidelines identify how the members will interact and communicate with each other. These basic “rules” ensure the group is responsible, accountable and respectful to each other as they work to accomplish their goals.

Successful groups use some form of group guidelines.

USE THIS PROCESS:	DO NOT USE THIS PROCESS:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• At the beginning of every session. “Before we begin here are a couple of working principles we need to review. This will ensure we can accomplish our goals today. Can we agree to use principles to guide our conversations today? Are there any others we need to add?”• To bring participants back to the topic or task• With a group that is struggling with behavior issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When the group cannot agree on the working principles

Group Understandings or Working Principles

Choose from these examples or create your own:

- **Everyone has wisdom** - we believe this is true of any group
- **We need everyone’s wisdom for the wisest result** - that is why we have group discussions
- **Everyone will hear and be heard** - allowing people fair “airtime”
- **There is no absolute right or wrong answers - only good ideas!** - we want to hear all ideas - there may be opposing viewpoints and that’s good - we need to explore those areas too
- **You can change your mind** - everyone comes to the table with their own perspectives, and it is through discussion with others that we can shift our thinking
- **Everyone takes responsibility for their own participation** - facilitation and process can only go so far in getting your voice heard - you need to participate at the level you feel comfortable with
- **Silence = Agreement** - speak up if you are uncomfortable even if you’re not sure why
- **If you hear something good, write it down** - too often we let good thinking and discussion go without recording it
- **Temporarily unhook from your distractions** - turn off the cell phone, try postponing the thoughts of outside distractions

DELIVERING FACILITATED SESSIONS





CREATING THE RIGHT QUESTION

What is it?

The right question can be just the tool the facilitator needs to create the perfect atmosphere for idea generation. The perfect question is clear, concise and thoughtful.

USE THIS PROCESS:

DO NOT USE THIS PROCESS:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When you are required to take a group through a process that needs to generate ideas.• When there is an issue that needs to be addressed by a group• When a concise, clear question is required for brainstorming | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When there is no need for focus questions. |
|---|--|

STEP 1

- Identify what the desired outcome of the session is. What is needed as a final product?
- Begin thinking of the questions needed to get the group to this point.

STEP 2

- Begin by drafting some questions. Remember:
 - Concise
 - Clear
 - Appropriate terminology
 - Avoid jargon
 - Prevent misinterpretation

Open-ended or closed-ended?

- Facilitators use open-ended or closed-ended questions.
 - Open-ended questions allow the respondent to come up with their own answer and stimulate much richer discussion than closed ended questions.
 - Closed-ended questions are answered with a yes or a no.

STEP 3

- Try asking another person you know for feedback on the clarity of the questions you wrote. You want to ensure they are crystal clear.

ORID - FOCUSED CONVERSATION METHOD

ORID is a structured facilitation framework used to guide focused conversation after a shared experience, helping groups reflect, make meaning, and move toward decisions. Developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs, it is based on the idea that better decisions come from first exploring facts and acknowledging reactions.

The four stages of ORID:

- **Objective (What?)** – What facts, data, or observations do we know?
- **Reflective (What about it?)** – How did people feel or react?
- **Interpretive (So what?)** – What meaning, insights, or significance emerge?
- **Decisional (Now what?)** – What actions or decisions will we take?

Good ORID questions are:

- Prepared in advance and aligned with outcomes
- Open-ended and specific
- Sequenced from simple to deeper reflection

Facilitation tips:

- Guide participants to share one idea at a time and stay within each stage
- Use flipcharts or summaries to capture key points
- Avoid rushing the Objective and Reflective stages, they strengthen later discussion
- Works best with a neutral facilitator and can be used for planning, evaluation, and issue identification

A strong ORID feels like a natural conversation, with smooth transitions between stages, helping groups get to meaningful insights and clear decisions.



Adapted from Practical Facilitation: A Toolkit of Techniques, Chapter 3
(Christine Hogan, 2003, Kogan Page Publishers)



BRAINSTORMING

What is it?

Brainstorming is a tool that allows participants to generate many extremely creative ideas in a relatively short amount of time. These ideas are recorded and visible to all participants throughout the session. Brainstorming takes place in a positive environment that is free of criticism.

WHEN TO USE THIS PROCESS:	WHEN NOT TO USE THIS PROCESS:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When you require a group to generate a large number of ideas• When you want people to be creative and spontaneous• When you feel your team needs to bond with a fun exercise	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When you don't need ideas generated

STEP 1

- Define the issue that needs to be resolved clearly and concisely; a focus question works quite well here.
- Have a flipchart(s) or some other VISIBLE method of recording all the generated ideas prepared. Participants must be able to see their ideas.

STEP 2

- Explain to the group that you want a large volume of ideas generated here; therefore, some ground rules:
 - Think of ideas and write them down first
 - No criticism of any ideas
 - No discussion/debate at this point, we want ideas!
 - Creativity is key!
 - There are no poor ideas
 - All ideas will be recorded

STEP 3

- Begin brainstorming by unveiling the focus question or issue to be discussed
- Keep encouraging the group to continue working, until all ideas have been exhausted
- Encourage participants to generate new ideas based on ideas from others
- Make sure all ideas are recorded as they are brainstormed

Variation:

- At the end of the session, ideas can be prioritized
- Have participants record their ideas onto post it notes.



AFFINITY PROCESS

What is it?

The Affinity process is a tool that promotes thoughtful generation of ideas that are then grouped based on natural relationships between the items. Ideas are captured by writing them on Post-it notes. This process helps avoid lengthy discussion and rationalization of ideas among participants.

WHEN TO USE THIS PROCESS:	WHEN NOT TO USE THIS PROCESS:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This process is most helpful for collecting ideas, opinions, thoughts, etc and organizing them into groupings based on natural relationships between each item.• Its strength is that it does not require lengthy discussion, and it encourages the creative identification of many points or issues.• This process is useful in bringing issues or thoughts together in sets or patterns that the group identifies.• It is useful for helping get large amounts of generated data grouped.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There have not been enough items identified for the tool to be useful – basically less than 14 items or so.

Step 1

- Each participant is given a number of post-it notes. The 7.5 cm X 7.5 cm (3"X3") size work very well for this exercise.
- The facilitator identifies the question at hand, by reading it, distributing it on a handout or posting it on a flipchart page that is visible to all participants.
- The facilitator provides instructions/guidelines. You can use post-it notes to demonstrate the desired result – one guideline per note:
 - **Silently and** individually brainstorm. Then record your responses.
 - One idea / thought per post-it notes (we will be sorting them)
 - Print large and legibly (they need to be read from 4-5 ft away)
 - Be concise and clear (to avoid misinterpretation)
 - Use 5 to 7 words
 - Feel free to use as many post-it notes as you need

Step 2

- Each participant will briefly share one of their ideas and then stick it on the board. The issue does not get criticized, debated or discussed other than for clarification at this point.
- The process continues until all the ideas are on the board.
- As a result of hearing ideas from other members, participants should have the opportunity to add any further ones.

Step 3

- Arrange notes into related groupings (finding the affinity). This sorting is done by the entire group silently and simultaneously so no one person influences the groupings.
- First, the facilitator asks the group to look for two notes that seem to be similar or related in some way and place them to one side. Look for others that are either related to each other or to the other existing groupings.
- It's best if groupings are done on an instinctual level, rather than over-thinking the groupings.
- The goal is to have the notes placed into 6 to 10 groupings.
- Do not try to force single notes into groupings where they don't belong.
- Notes may be continually moved from grouping to grouping, that is OK! If you don't like where the note is.. Move it!

Step 4

- Look for a note in each grouping that captures the central idea that ties all the notes together. This is referred to as the "header". Create header titles on larger sticky notes for each grouping.
- Gather each grouping together with its header at the top of the column.
- The issues can now be captured, organized into related groupings, prioritized or used as the foundation for additional work that the group will continue working on.

Variation:

- Private - Authors are anonymous
- As participants are creating post-it notes at their place, the facilitator collects them quietly and randomly as various ones are completed. Many cycles through the room may be necessary
- Facilitator posts all issues randomly on a board avoiding any sense of order or identifiers



DOTMOCRACY (DOT VOTING)

What is it?

Dotmocracy is a tool that allows a number of participants to prioritize ideas / suggestions in a short amount of time. The process is fun and quick to do! The process is visual and involves everyone's participation.

WHEN TO USE THIS PROCESS:	WHEN NOT TO USE THIS PROCESS:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This tool is useful for prioritizing items in a large list of items.• It can be used to identify where the group has consensus on what they feel is important.• It is quick, and effective.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When you do not have enough items, it is probably not necessary.• When you have too many choices! (It is better to group similar ideas together first.)

Step 1

- Use the results of a previous brainstorming process. Ensure the ideas to be "voted" on are clearly separated or spaced.

Step 2

- Prepare dots in advance, cut into strips based on how many each person will receive. Dots around 8 mm to 13 mm work well for visibility and space.
- Pre-plan distribution so the total number of dots roughly matches the number of items (e.g., 64 items = 64 dots total, divided among participants).
- As a guideline, give each person 3-10 dots and adjust as needed for the group size and number of items.

Step 3

- Briefly outline the ground rules for Dotmocracy:
 - Everyone votes at the same time; no observing others before voting
 - Dots can be placed on any item, as long as placement is clear
 - Participants can distribute dots however they choose (all on one item or spread out)
 - Dots cannot be moved once placed

Step 4

- Tell them they can begin voting. Make sure there is no one sitting back and not voting at this time.
- It is best if people are not verbally checking with others as to where they should place their votes, or how they should vote at this stage.

Step 5

- Beginning with the highest "dotted" results, the facilitator tallies up the dots per item and records each result with a marker and circles it. You can recruit a helper for this part if needed.
- Announce the results, usually the top 5 items, beginning with the one with the most votes.

Variations:

- Vary the number of dots per person!
- Require participants to spread votes across a minimum number of items



GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT

What is it?

Gradients of Agreement is a tool used in complex decision-making to understand levels of support within a group. Instead of a simple yes/no vote, participants indicate where they fall on a spectrum of agreement, supporting a more nuanced, consensus-based approach.

WHEN TO USE THIS PROCESS	WHEN NOT TO USE THIS PROCESS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Helps a group move from disagreement to a decision everyone can agree on at some level.• When we don't know how strong support is for an idea.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This tool doesn't make decisions – decisions are only made after satisfactory discussion.• When we need a quick majority decision.

Step 1

Ask the group what consensus means, discuss briefly, then provide a clear definition. Introduce the levels of agreement and review the scale.

Step 2

Present the proposed decision or solution on a flipchart and draw the agreement scale beneath it.

Step 3

Go around the group and have each participant mark where they fall on the scale.

Step 4

Ask those who disagree or veto what changes would make the proposal more acceptable. Adjust the proposal based on input.

Step 5

Re-poll the group (use a different colour if helpful) and repeat as needed until an acceptable level of agreement is reached.

Variations:

Use different agreement scales (e.g., strong support to strong opposition, or numerical scales) depending on the group and context.



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT UNIT

Further Assistance and Support

The Community Development Unit of Alberta Arts, Culture and Status of Women provides training, facilitation, and consultation to community-serving organizations in order to help them improve their organizational effectiveness and build their capacity to achieve their goals.

Some areas of assistance include:

- Planning, including strategic planning, operational planning, action planning.
- Board development (roles and responsibilities, effective meeting management, bylaw review, etc.).
- Collaboration, leadership and partnerships, large community development initiatives and projects.
- Grant resources, fund raising and proposal writing training.

Consultation Line: dial 310-000, then 780-963-2281

Email: communitydevelopment@gov.ab.ca

Non-profit Learning Centre: <https://www.alberta.ca/non-profit-learning-centre.aspx>