

# Tips for Facilitators

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# Tips for Facilitators

## Introduction

This professional development resource was designed to provide assistance to group facilitators, such as school leaders, professional development coordinators, peer coaches, team leaders, mentors, and professors. Facilitators will find this guide invaluable for planning and guiding a successful meeting. This handy booklet describes different professional development opportunities, the principles of effective professional development, some characteristics of an effective facilitator, the responsibilities of the facilitator, and practical tips and strategies to make the meeting more successful.

*Tips for Facilitators* was created to complement Corwin Press' Facilitator's Guides. Each Corwin Press Facilitator's Guide includes a summary of each chapter in the book, discussion questions, activities, journal writing prompts, and suggestions for practical application. In other words, Corwin Press Facilitator's Guides contain all the information you need to design professional development activities for any size group or setting around some of Corwin Press' most popular books.

## Types of Professional Development

Many educators hear the words "professional development" and automatically think of sitting in a dark room listening to an expert tell them how to do a better job. The picture of professional development is rapidly changing. Educators are now being challenged to stretch their abilities and focus on developing their skills through a continuous learning process in collaboration with other educators. Professional development in the educational system can

take many forms, such as independent study, action research, peer coaching, mentoring, study groups, observation, and, of course, the more traditional workshops.

As a facilitator, you will most likely be leading a workshop for small or large groups. Each type of workshop serves a unique purpose and will be conducted differently.

### **Small Group Workshops**

Small group workshops typically involve a very small number of participants who share a common goal or need. The small group environment is more conducive to the collaborative process; therefore, it is easier to develop the content and goals of the workshop based on collective agreement. In addition, there is usually a better understanding about shared work and more specialized support in a small group setting (York-Barr et al., 2001). Small groups of participants can more effectively intervene with identified students, and have a direct influence on the daily work of educators (York-Barr et al., 2001; Guskey, 2000). Finally, small groups workshops tend to foster the continual development of educators since they are not usually a single learning experience (Guskey, 2000).

Small group models may include: action research (individuals or teams), study groups, grade-level teams, content-area teams, case study reviews, interactive or individual journaling, coaching, mentoring, group examination of student work.

### **Large Group Workshops**

Large group workshops typically involve a large number of participants with a variety of reasons for participating. Most importantly, the large group provides an efficient, cost effective way to disseminate information, or provide a common knowledge base and vocabulary for current professional development work (Guskey, 2000). The large group format gives educators the benefit of interacting with colleagues of all levels of experience who bring numerous perspectives to the meeting and provide valuable professional support in a shared endeavor. In addition, the large group format increases awareness and understanding of the broader scope of the improvement effort (York-Barr et al., 2001). Finally, a large group often facilitates collaboration among schools and districts that might normally be foreign to one another.

Large group models may include: study groups, interdisciplinary groups, cross-grade level groups, expert presentations, training sessions, seminars, continuing education classes, teacher preparation classes.

## Principles of Effective Professional Development

In the face of educational crisis, the importance of effective professional development as a key to improving student achievement is being recognized. Resources are too valuable to be wasted on ineffective practices that do nothing to advance the cause of improving student achievement. The National Staff Development Council is a non-profit association dedicated to improving the quality of staff development to ensure success for all students. The NSDC has conducted extensive research about professional development and compiled a list of standards for professional development. These standards form the basis for many successful professional development programs. View the NSDC standards at <http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm>.

According to NSDC, for professional development to be effective it must:

- Begin with the professional learning community. While there are numerous definitions of professional learning communities, most agree on some central themes. Groups are comprised of dedicated educators continuously supporting one another in improving their learning and practice to advance student achievement (Bredeson, 2003; Collay et al., 1998).
- Use multiple sources of concrete data to determine professional learning priorities, evaluate professional progress, and sustain improvement. Decisions about professional development needs are based on disaggregated student data. Data is also used to evaluate the effectiveness of a program and sustain the development of educators.
- Employ research and strategies conducive to practical application. The theories and strategies demonstrated in the workshop can be utilized in day-to-day practice.
- Mandate continuous professional learning in a collaborative, mutually supportive, and interactive learning environment. Educators form supportive groups that have regular opportunities to collaborate, exchange ideas or information, share experiences, discuss progress, observe and learn from each other. Professional learning must be a continuous endeavor to advance student achievement.
- Model a safe learning environment with high expectations for achievement and gives educators the tools to assist students in meeting academic standards. The professional development opportunity will provide a safe learning environment for

educators to stretch themselves and learn practical tools and strategies as demonstrated in the workshop. Educators will be held to high standards of achievement in their own learning to prepare them to hold students to high standards.

- Be aligned with the goals of the school and district. Professional development experiences must have a clear connection to the curriculum frameworks, academic standards, and student assessments of the school and district. It must be related to improving student achievement.

## Characteristics of an Effective Facilitator

Every facilitator will bring his or her own set of unique qualities to the session. However, certain characteristics will make a facilitator much more effective and the group more successful.

An effective facilitator forms a mutual trust relationship with the group—the group trusts the facilitator to foster a safe environment while the facilitator trusts the group to engage in meaningful learning. In addition, the facilitator possesses strong interpersonal skills and has the ability to build rapport with people quickly (Eller, 2004). He or she is open and sensitive to the feelings of others and can make others feel at ease.

An effective facilitator carefully observes the group to diagnose how well the group is working together. Based on those observations, the facilitator makes adjustments and implements different strategies to improve the working relationship of the group (Eller, 2004). However, the facilitator avoids overt control of the direction of the session and allows others to assume responsibility for achieving the desired the outcomes (York-Barr et al., 2001). Skill in depersonalizing anger and negative comments help the effective facilitator guide a group through the process of reaching the desired outcomes (Eller, 2004).

An effective facilitator listens actively to participants, but remains neutral and nondefensive. While guiding the group through different perspectives and helping them engage in constructive dialogue (York-Barr et al., 2001), the facilitator does not impose his or her will on the group or advance his or her own agenda. The group must reach its own conclusions. The facilitator displays confidence, but temporarily suspends his or her opinions in order to listen to ideas or suggestions from others (Eller, 2004).

An effective facilitator has the ability to look at the big picture in relation to the work the group is engaged in performing. The facilitator has a clear understanding of the tasks the group is

to complete, can break them into manageable segments, and can successfully articulate the work to the participants (Eller, 2004).

## Responsibilities of the Facilitator

A facilitator “guides a group through processes to discover its own specific outcomes” (Killion & Simmons, 1992, as cited in York-Barr et al., 2001). A facilitator serves the needs of his or her group by allowing the participants to do most of the talking, setting up the conditions for success, and creating a safe and open environment for discussion (Eller, 2004). But, what exactly are the responsibilities of a facilitator? Garmston and Wellman (1999) cite the “three primary goals of the facilitator as: facilitating task accomplishment, the development of group processes, and the overall development of a group” (as cited in York-Barr et al., 2001).

Facilitators fulfill their duties by:

- Providing a safe but stimulating meeting climate
- Providing a global view of the group and its processes
- Serving the group in whatever ways are needed to help it be successful in its assignment
- Acting as a group coach; setting the conditions for the group to see the problem, design its own solutions, and implement the plan it has designed; keeping the group positive and on track
- Taking in group energy and emotions and rechanneling these to help the group stay productive
- Tracking conversations; bringing the group back into focus when the conversation strays too far off topic
- Providing information needed by the group to complete its assignment (Eller, 2004)
- Encouraging participants to share knowledge with others outside of the session (Murphy & Lick, 2005)

As you prepare for the workshop, there are several tasks you will need to complete. First, prepare an agenda and articulate the goals and outcomes for the session. If possible, request input from the participants when setting the agenda and establishing goals. Second, inform the participants of the time, place, purpose, required materials, and required reading for the meeting. It is helpful to send participants a reminder a few days prior to the meeting.

Third, make sure you secure an acceptable location for an adequate amount of time and prepare the room for the meeting. Have furniture, technological devices, and materials accessible and in working order. Fourth, organize refreshments for the session and place them in a convenient location. You can solicit the help of other participants or groups (such as parent/student groups, community volunteers, or professional caterers) to organize the refreshments. Finally, arrange for someone to take the minutes of the meeting (as necessary) and distribute to all participants—and other interested parties—following the session.

## Tips for the Facilitator

The following are some important considerations when planning and presenting a professional development workshop.

### Physical Space

1. Be cognizant of the arrangement of the furniture. Different arrangements facilitate different types of meetings. Create an arrangement that promotes group interaction—circle, horseshoe, small groups. Determine an appropriate place for activities that require movement.
2. Make sure all participants can see the facilitator and any visual aides. If participants are seated in circles and some will have their backs to the speaker, make sure there is enough space to turn chairs around.
3. Be aware of the lighting in the room. If the lights must be dimmed for digital presentations, make sure the switch is in an accessible place and you do not waste time moving back and forth to turn on the lights.
4. Make sure participants can easily find the meeting place. Give directions ahead of time and post signs at the meeting site. A few days before the meeting, send a reminder notice to participants with date, time, and directions.
5. Refreshments are usually welcome at meetings. Place the refreshments in an accessible area, but where they will not be a distraction. For a full day session, provide refreshments for the beginning of the session, a morning break, and an afternoon break. If lunch is provided, ask the refreshment coordinator to prepare it with as little disruption as possible. If lunch is not provided, give participants a list of options for restaurants or other nearby facilities.

6. Consider the use of music to set the tone for your meeting. Have music playing in the background as participants enter the room, play music during reflective writing time, or use music to signal a transition.
7. Be prepared with adequate supplies. Make sure you have a few extra handouts; people often lose them or want to take a clean copy. Materials should be organized for each activity and easily accessible for participants. Double check the technological tools you will be using (computer, overhead, slides, television sets, etc.). Have a back up plan if one should stop working during the session.

## Communication

1. Practice reflective listening. Listen carefully to what all participants have to say, then paraphrase and give it back.
2. Use specific language and a distinct tone to steer discussions where you want them to go. Use positive prompts that initiate thinking in the right direction. For example, "What can we do together to . . ." or "As we move forward, what are the next steps in . . ."
3. Respect adult behavior, but expect professional courtesy. Make it clear that this meeting is important work and in order to meet the objective, all participants must behave in a professional manner.
4. Use visuals effectively. Visuals can reinforce information, deflect negative attention from the facilitator, synthesize data, demonstrate knowledge, present a concrete image of a concept, and validate insights. When you need participants to remember something, get them to see it in as many forms as possible.
5. Be aware of your position in the room as you facilitate the meeting. If you stand in the front of the group for the entire meeting it implies you command all the attention. If you remain seated at the back of the room throughout the session, it implies you are not in control of the group.
6. Use natural gestures to emphasize your intentions or meaning. Gestures and other forms of nonverbal communication can also help maintain control of the group and deflect negative energy from its intended target.
7. When giving directions, keep in mind the task and the audience. Remember that your participants are adults, but the directions must still be clear and easy to follow.
8. Prepare an "attention-getting" signal and articulate it to the participants. Use the signal to bring the large group back together or calm a chaotic moment.

## The Meeting

1. Set the tone for the meeting. The tone of the meeting will depend on the objective, but using visuals, lighting, music, refreshments, furniture, and introductory activities will help get participants on the right track.
2. Open the meeting by framing the purpose. Make clear the goals, objectives and what you hope to accomplish during the session. Discuss the pre-set agenda or involve the group in setting the agenda.
3. If participants are not familiar with one another, begin the meeting with activities that require interaction. If participants are familiar with one another, begin the meeting with activities that connect with the purpose.
4. Use a variety of techniques and strategies. This helps keep participants motivated, addresses different learning styles, and models effective strategies for practical application. However, make sure the activities are directly related to the objectives of the group.
5. Encourage everyone to participate. Model accepting language and behavior that will make it easier for people to share and take risks. Utilize activities that require contributions from all members. Attempt to make a connection with all participants and encourage participants to connect with each other.
6. Monitor the energy of the group. If energy is waning, start an energizing activity. If discussions are becoming heated, help the group redirect their energy.
7. When resolving conflicts try to remain neutral. Guide the group through the conflict resolution process without prejudice or judgment.

## Dealing With Difficult People and Situations

1. Place controversial information on a handout, chart, or project onto a screen. This takes the focus away from you or the speaker as the source of the information.
2. Use reflection techniques and gestures when arguments get heated. Restate what people have said in a calm, neutral tone, or use hand gestures to indicate your intentions. If necessary, take a break and give participants a chance to cool down. Resume the meeting with positive statements.

3. Involve the participants in establishing ground rules for behavior. Remind people of these rules if they interrupt, use personal attacks, or promote negativity.
4. If the group seems disinterested in the task, try breaking the meeting into parts or engaging the participants in conversation about how to accomplish the task. If a single participant seems disengaged, use proximity, eye contact, and questioning techniques to bring him or her into the meeting.
5. When dealing with difficult people and situations, it is important to remember that it is not a personal reflection the facilitator. However, it is the facilitator's responsibility to identify the difficult people and situations and take an active role in resolving the issue as quickly and as unobtrusively as possible.

## Adult Learners

Marcia Tate outlines six principles of adult learning theory in her book *"Sit and Get" Won't Grow Dendrites: 20 Professional Learning Strategies That Engage the Adult Brain* (2004). Adults and children learn in different ways, therefore, educational strategies must be modified when working with adult educators.

- Adults should have input into what they will be learning about and how they will be learning it. The participants should be involved with choosing the content and developing the plan to reach desired outcomes.
- Adult learners bring knowledge and experience to the new learning environment. It is important for adult learners to connect what they already know to the new learning experience.
- Adults receive information and learn in many ways, just as children do. Adults also have preferred learning modalities—auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, visual.
- Adult learning is more effective when it “addresses the concerns and issues faced daily” by the learner. In addition, adults are more comfortable when learning takes place in a collaborative environment,
- Adult learners need time to reflect on new knowledge and implementation of new skills.
- Adult learners need on-going support to apply and sustain what has been learned.

## Professional Development Strategies

### Forming Groups

When forming groups try to use fun and interesting methods. Instead of allowing participants to choose their own groups (and their friends), prompt them to form groups by color, number, or letters. Depending on how many participants and how many groups you need, choose a method that will be fun while still providing random groupings. Some examples include: distribute playing cards and organize the groups by number or suit; organize groups by an article of clothing (e.g. all those with coats on, all those with black trousers); have participants line up in order of professional experience—most freshman to most senior; have participants arrange themselves in order by place of birth—closest to most distant from meeting place.

### Brainstorming

Brainstorming is intended to get lots of ideas flowing and put them out there for consideration. Editing should never be a part of the brainstorming session. Only after all ideas have been exhausted should the group begin examining the ideas and studying the merit of each. As the facilitator it is imperative that you remain neutral during the brainstorming session. Be very careful not to pass judgment on any ideas through verbal or nonverbal language. Some brainstorming activities include: web, small group brainstorm, add five, round robin, jigsaw, lists, popcorn.

The following is an example of a brainstorming activity.

This brainstorming activity works very well if you have a number of topics that need to be covered in a relatively short period of time. Write one topic on a sheet of chart paper and post it on a wall. Repeat for each topic you need to cover. Allow adequate space around each paper for people to gather. Ask participants to stand in front of a chart and when you say so they will brainstorm as many ideas as possible on that topic. When you call time, they will stop, switch gears, and move to the next chart to repeat the process. After everyone has had a chance to contribute to each topic, gather the large group back together and analyze the results.

### Discussion

Try to use a variety of discussion methods during the session. Participants can discuss in pairs, small groups, or large groups. Be sure everyone has an opportunity to be heard during discussions. Some discussion activities include: interview, think-pair-share, ice

breakers, dialogue, fishbowl, question/answer sessions, panel presentations, focus groups, and group reflections.

The following is an example of a discussion activity.

The interview technique can help deepen participants' understanding of the topic. Organize the participants into pairs. In a discussion about the topic, the interviewer actively listens to the interviewee, commenting and asking appropriate questions. Then the participants switch roles. The partners then join with another partnership to form a group of four. The members introduce one another and describe what they gleaned from their partner. After everyone has shared, the foursome determines the main ideas generated by the discussion. Finally, invite a representative from each foursome to share their ideas with the whole group. (Eller, 2004)

## **Examination of Work**

Encourage participants to examine professional practices, student work, student achievement data, and other evidence of progress. During an examination of work, participants thoroughly examine and analyze the work, data, or evidence as a step in the process of achieving the desired outcome. When examining the work of a colleague or student, it is imperative to maintain professional decorum. Determine the ground rules for examining a participant's work and clearly articulate them for the group. The environment must remain safe and open for sharing, but honest analysis is still the key to progress. Some ways to examine contributions: keep a journal and share with the group; bring in samples of student or adult work; show video samples of actual situations; provide concrete data for analysis; demonstrate a professional practice; showcase a professional portfolio; examine a lesson plan; study school records; or share a case study.

## **Professional Interaction**

Provide educators with opportunities to interact with other professionals in their field. Formal and informal interactions can increase awareness of professional practices, provide professional support systems, and help advance the cause of student achievement. There are numerous ways to encourage professional interaction: observation of colleagues, personal correspondence (e-mail, traditional mail, conference calls), peer coaching, networking, forming partnerships, study groups, demonstration lessons, informal meetings, or interactive journaling.

The following is an example of an activity to encourage professional interaction.

Provide participants with an opportunity to learn from and support one another through peer coaching. Peer coaches provide

professional support, constructive feedback and assistance when needed. Peer coaches can be more readily available than consultants and understand the individual needs of the educator. A peer coach helps the educator learn and refine skills, implement practices learned in workshops, and solve problems.

### **Field Trips**

Authentic learning experiences ensure better retention and understanding of content. When participants can experience the content they will have a better understanding of the concept and a clearer picture of its application in their world (Tate, 2004). Therefore, if appropriate, take participants on a field trip to a school to observe a teaching technique, or to a research lab to study a physics experiment, or to medical lecture to learn about brain research.

### **Demonstration of Knowledge**

For many meetings and workshops, educators must demonstrate newly acquired knowledge or skills. They can show what they have learned or demonstrate progress toward a specific goal with some of the following activities: demonstration lessons, development of a product (such as a lesson plan, school plan, or artifact), simulation, analogy, or a digital presentation.

### **Learning Modalities**

To appeal to the kinesthetic and tactile learners, get people moving with these activities: games, manipulatives, models, music, drama, and role playing. For visual learners try some of these activities: graphic organizers, drawings, maps, webs, posters, and video presentations. For aural learners try: storytelling, formal presentations, or interviews.

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