



## Appendix H

### Skills and Tips for Group Facilitation

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## What Is Group Facilitation?

Group facilitation is the process where group facilitators:

- ★ Help participants to assign meaning to their goals and expectations for the sessions,
- ★ Guide participants in discussion that creates an opportunity for them to learn from one another, and
- ★ Coach participants in the learning and practice of new skills.

Group facilitation is not the same as counseling or instructing a group of participants. In brief interventions such as **Nia**, one of the main objectives in facilitating a group is for the participants to take responsibility for the direction the group takes within the context of the session goals and objectives.

## **Why do you need group facilitation skills?**

Being skilled in guiding the group process is important because, as the facilitator, you are responsible for making sure these three main objectives are met.

- ★ The goals of the group sessions are met.
- ★ Participants in the group feel safe and comfortable to contribute to the discussion.
- ★ Discussion topics raised by participants in the session are addressed sufficiently.

If a participant raises a matter that is not appropriate for the group to address, you should know how to refer the participant to additional services or to table the matter for a more appropriate time while also keeping the general group session on target.

## **What are group facilitation skills?**

Good facilitation skills can be learned. These skills include, but are not limited to:

- ★ Modeling skills for participants to practice,
- ★ Providing constructive feedback on role-plays, safer sex strategies, or other forms of skills-building practice
- ★ Establishing trust,
- ★ Helping to create bonding among participants,
- ★ Keeping participants involved in the discussions,
- ★ Creating a sense of shared ownership in their input,
- ★ Keeping discussions on track and on time,
- ★ Maintaining an open climate and safe environment,
- ★ Maintaining respect among participants, and
- ★ Managing different personality types.

### **Tips for modeling skills for participants**

Modeling skills for participants is an important part of facilitating groups. If you model skills effectively, learning the proper way to perform a skill can be enhanced among the participants. You should be well-prepared and familiar with the material in advance of modeling. A part of being prepared is being comfortable in using the skills taught in a particular session. If the skill requires two persons to model, practice the skills in advance with your co-facilitator so you can develop a rhythm for modeling to the participants.

### **Tips for providing constructive feedback on skills-building practice**

Encouraging and correcting participants' performance of role-plays through constructive feedback is an important skill to develop as a group facilitator. As mentioned earlier, one purpose of group facilitation is to help the participant learn and practice new skills. Implied in participants learning and practicing new skills is that participants will learn new skills properly through feedback from the facilitators.

Constructive feedback should be offered in an open and respectful manner. For example, you can prepare the observers or the participants for offering feedback on a role-play performance by listing the goals of the exercise. This allows you to ask if the necessary features of the skill are being performed. You also could ask the other group members what can be done differently. If necessary, you or your co-facilitator can model the skill to ensure that the participants are clear on how to perform the role-play.

### **Tips for establishing trust**

Trust is a belief that participants' sharing their life experiences and opinions are important to the other participants and to the facilitators. An important characteristic of trust is the belief that other participants and the facilitators will treat the information shared in the group with respect, not judge a participant for sharing their opinions or experiences, or repeat any personal information to others outside the group sessions. You can establish trust among the participants by establishing group rules collectively, emphasizing the importance of each participant not judging one another based on information shared, and keeping information shared within the group confidential.

In **Nia**, group rules are established early in the first session. Following the group rules consistently throughout each session helps to establish a group norm. It also reduces the chances that facilitators interact with participants with favoritism and maintains the facilitators' roles as neutral. A facilitator can review the purpose of the sessions and the group rules at the beginning of each meeting.

Opening the group session by checking in with participants and asking them what their goals and expectations are for the session can also help build trust. Trust can be weakened when you allow individual needs or interests of a given participant to take

priority over the group's interests. If you are inconsistent in following the agreed-upon group rules, you may appear to favor one participant over another. Participants also may sense that there is no structure when certain behaviors are allowed to take place randomly. If you notice that group trust is beginning to weaken, using a structured exercise that encourages teamwork and bonding can help re-establish trust among the participants and facilitators. Verbally acknowledge to the group if you have not been consistently following the group rules and state that they are an important tool for you to use to help ensure each member is experiencing what they came to the session to experience. State that from this point on, you all will be attentive to the rules, and your co-facilitator will help you refer to them, if you or the participants become distracted with the group activities.

### **Tips for creating bonding among participants**

Bonding is the relationship that develops among participants as a result of shared experience and trust being established. Built into most interventions are different types of exercises facilitators can use to help participants get to know one another a little more. These activities can help participants meet one another, lighten the tone of the session, and refocus their attention on the topic. They can be organized so that participants work in pairs or smaller groups and learn more about one another.

Another way to help participants bond is through the use of scheduled breaks with snacks. This can create "free" time where participants talk among themselves and take a break from the topic at hand. A facilitator also can help participants bond by using humor to lighten the discussion. When addressing personal topics, such as sexual risk behaviors, sometimes the discussion can become heavy. Appropriate use of humor to introduce session activities or exercises can set the tone in which the group discusses issues and create opportunities for participants to learn various aspects of one another's personality.

You can also create bonding among the participants by appropriately disclosing some information about yourself at the right time. This decision requires good judgment and may be restricted by policies at your agency. However, if you choose to share personal information about yourself, you can do so without offering too much detailed information. Use just a few words or your body language to suggest that you identify with what the participants are experiencing. When disclosing, remember that the session time is for the participants' self-development, not the facilitators'.

Finally, checking in with the participants regarding their expectations for the session and comfort level, or "taking the group's temperature" periodically throughout each session, can help establish bonding. Check in early in each session to determine what their expectations and goals are for the session. By doing so, other participants may identify similar experiences and goals and be encouraged to share their own thoughts with the group. Check in mid-way through each session to provide opportunities for participants to stop and think about what they have experienced so far and begin to assess whether or not they feel that they are reaching their goals. Sharing their thoughts about the session

up to that point can be useful for other participants to understand their own experiences and help them feel connected to others who give similar feedback. Checking in mid-way also gives the facilitators a chance to address any issues developing around a specific topic or activity and offers time to correct any misinformation or misunderstandings. Finally, check in at the end of each session and summarize the participants' observations; this helps participants review their session experience, as well as bond with other group members.

Bonding can be derailed if you do not pay attention to the participant's non-verbal and verbal cues. These cues can indicate whether or not participants understand the discussion, are engaged in the session, and agree with the issues raised. You can re-establish bonding among participants by engaging the group for more feedback on what they wish to experience and what they are experiencing. Write down the participants' feedback on easel paper, and create a specified amount of time either in the current session or the next session to continue working toward the stated goals and expectations.

### **Tips for keeping participants involved in the discussion**

Involvement in group discussion takes place when the majority of the group's participants feel comfortable enough to sincerely and openly share their thoughts and respect the other group members' contributions. You can make participants feel this way by remaining neutral in your opinions, making participants feel good about what they share, and creating ways where each participant has a chance to speak, if they wish.

As mentioned previously, facilitators can also create good group discussion by consistently following the group rules. Check in with the participants throughout the sessions to ensure they understand the activities and they are getting something meaningful out of the sessions. You can use a structured exercise conducted in smaller groups or in pairs as a tool for generating good discussion around a topic. This can help participants think about the scenario from their own experience and share their perspectives. If time does not allow for an exercise, you can ask the participants to internalize the scenario and reflect upon what they would do if they were in that current situation. Another point worth repeating is that facilitators can make participants feel good about sharing by "taking the group's temperature," the process of checking back with the group to see what participants think about the topic and the discussion.

Engage the participants by making eye contact when you speak to them and when they are speaking to the group. If you are writing on easel paper or preparing the room for an exercise, wait until you have finished before you begin to address the participants. Remember that people often take their cues from other people in the room. If you or your co-facilitator are not at ease introducing a topic or conducting an exercise, the participants may sense this discomfort. Be prepared in advance of the group session for the topics and exercises so you do not need to refer to your notes throughout the sessions. After preparing for the session, if you feel uncomfortable in the session or you lose your place in facilitating the group, your co-facilitator can help remind you of the next exercise or activity. If your co-facilitator is not able to help you refocus the group

discussion, take a short break, and give yourself an opportunity to meet with your co-facilitator. Use this time to either change facilitation roles or refocus your thoughts and activities for the remaining time of the session.

A good group discussion can be interrupted by the facilitators not being familiar with the session material or making awkward transitions into the next activity or exercise. Co-facilitators can help one another get back on track by quickly checking in with participants to see if they are feeling comfortable with the discussion up to that point. If the participants are not comfortable, you can use a limited amount of time to explore what the participants would like to experience in the remaining time of the session. Try to be as responsive to their needs as you can while following the agenda. It is not necessary to have full closure on every issue raised by the end of a session. An issue raised can be addressed to some extent and then tabled for another time, such as after the group, for more discussion. Ask the group's permission to take notes on such issues.

### **Tips for creating a sense of shared ownership**

Shared ownership is when participants feel as though they own a part of the group process that is taking place. You can help group participants feel this way by encouraging them to be involved in group activities, exercises, and discussions. This is important because, when people feel as though they are active participants in activities or conversation, they may be more likely to be more honest and frank about their experiences and help one another follow the group rules. This openness adds value to the group discussions and cooperation regarding the rules helps the group stay on track.

Just as with creating trust, you can create a sense of shared ownership among participants by establishing ground rules collectively and getting most of the participants to agree to them. Shared ownership also is created when facilitators help participants see the value of the session or the activities. You can do this at various times by encouraging participants to think about what they want to experience, what their goals are for the sessions, and whether or not they are achieving their goals.

Non-verbal communication can express messages of approval or disapproval to the participants and can make them feel included or excluded from the process. As the facilitator, be aware of your own body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions. Facilitators talking too much throughout the session can also interfere with creating a sense of shared ownership and may alienate some of the participants. Similarly, allowing certain participants to share too much can make other participants feel as though their experiences are not as valid and can interfere with the other participants feeling as though they share ownership in the group. If you notice that you may be expressing opinions through your body language or verbally dominating the discussions, refocus the group participants by acknowledging the behavior with the group and re-establishing a neutral role. To re-establish a neutral role, state that the process is for the participants to learn from one another and that your role as a facilitator is mainly to ensure that the session goals are met within the specified time period and that the participants feel free to share their experiences. As stated before, the facilitator can also re-establish a sense of shared

ownership by “taking the group’s temperature” and checking in to see if they are feeling as the discussion is beneficial for them.

### **Tips for keeping discussions on track and on time**

Keeping on track and on time is staying focused on the session agenda and within the allotted amount of time. This is important because each session is designed to shape personal behaviors and teach certain skills through different exercises and activities. Each exercise and activity has a set time in which to complete them. If you do not manage time well, you may have to omit exercises and activities, and the participants may not understand the information covered in the sessions. If you find yourself or the participants moving away from the discussion topic, either you or your co-facilitator can summarize what has been covered so far, then shift into the next activity or exercise. You also could ask one of the participants to summarize for the group the main points covered before moving on.

If you find yourself or the participants going beyond the time set for an activity, acknowledge that you want to respect everyone’s time by not going over and that you want to make sure the main points of the session are covered. Then ask the group if they are okay with moving on to the next activity. This will help maintain your role as a neutral and fair person helping everyone gain something positive from the discussions.

Also, your co-facilitator can help keep the group discussions and activities on time by giving you a discrete signal that time to close is approaching. If the participants are working in pairs or smaller groups, both facilitators can circulate around the room and remind participants of the time.

### **Tips for maintaining an open climate**

An open climate is a tone, established by both facilitators and other group participants, that welcomes honest and sincere sharing of life experiences and opinions. As mentioned earlier, checking in with the group is a valuable tool for facilitators. It can help you create an open climate by getting the participant’s feedback on what they understand, and what they expect to experience in the duration of the session. Sometimes, participants can make comments or ask questions that alienate other participants and interfere with the group process. If this happens, you can help re-establish an open climate by referring to the group rules and restating that the purpose of the session in general is for everyone to benefit from the information shared. Point out that, in order for learning to take place, everyone has to feel as though they are a part of the discussions. Then, acknowledge and address the issue for a certain allotted time. After discussing how participants feel, if you sense that more time may be needed to answer questions or address comments immediately, you can suggest that the group takes a short break, so you and/or your co-facilitator can speak with the participant(s) outside of the session. If you feel the matter can wait, then suggest to the group to address the issue after the session has completed.

## **Tips for maintaining a safe environment**

There are different ways an environment can be safe for participants. You can maintain participants' physical safety, in the rare event a fight or physical altercation erupts in the sessions, by being familiar with and following your agency's protocol for such situations. You definitely should clear the room, so other participants are not at risk of being harmed, and have a charged cellular phone with you to call for help, if necessary. After the altercation, dismiss the group. This will give you and your co-facilitator time to evaluate the event and determine if the group should be re-convened.

A safe environment can also be created by group facilitators' protection of the participants' privacy. Both facilitators can sign confidentiality forms that ensure the participants' right to privacy. In addition to the facilitators protecting the participants' privacy, it is important that participants protect one another's privacy as well. To help remind participants how important this is, refer to the group rules and emphasize that everyone has the right to share or not to share in each session. If information has been disclosed about one participant by another participant to an outside person, first address the matter with the participant whose information was shared. Give them the option to either stay in the group or change groups. You also can remind them that they do have the right not to participate in the intervention if they feel too uncomfortable in the sessions. Then address the issue strongly with the participant who shared the information, reminding them of the group rules and the importance of confidentiality. If the issue is severe enough, you should consider asking the person who released the personal information to leave the group since that should have been the understanding at the start of the group. In keeping with the confidentiality agreements, information about this situation is not to be shared with the other group members, aside from a reminder to them all of the importance of the group rules.

## **Tips for maintaining respect among participants**

You should maintain respect among the participants for each others' ideas, choices, and life experiences. This can be done by sincerely listening to the discussions and validating the experiences participants share. This not only models for the participants how to respect one another, but it also demonstrates to them your respect for the topics being discussed and adds credibility to your role as the facilitator. Mutual respect established among the participants can be weakened when facilitators allow participants to make verbal comments or non-verbal gestures that may make others feel uncomfortable. If mutual respect is weakened by a group participant, the facilitator can refer to the group rules and then give the participant a chance to express their opinion in a respectful way. Use some time to talk through people's feelings around what was stated or suggested. If you or your co-facilitator damages the mutual respect, the responsible facilitator should acknowledge their behavior immediately and state that group rules apply to the facilitators as well. You should also check-in with the group to see what their feelings are about the issue before moving into the next exercise or activity.

## Tips for managing different personality types

One thing that makes group discussions interesting and fun is the mix of personalities the participants show. As a facilitator, striking a balance among the various personalities to ensure the session goals are met is very important. Too much of any given personality dominating the group can be a problem. Some of the types of personalities that could be in a group include a gatekeeper, encourager, information giver, summarizer, blocker, dominator, and information seeker.

**Gatekeeper:** A gatekeeper is typically someone who involves various group members in the conversation or activities. Sometimes having a person who is not facilitating the group take on this role can be distracting. One of the ways you can include this person without breaking the group bonding process is to acknowledge the importance for everyone to share. In doing so, remind the group of any relevant group rules that may have been agreed to and include a statement that people should feel free to either participate or not at any time. Also remind the group that, as group members, we should respect someone else's choice not to share.

You also can include gatekeepers in the process by getting feedback from them during the session breaks. This can help you stay connected to what their thoughts are and help them stay focused on the purpose of the meeting without alienating them or making them feel as though their input is not valued.

- ☺ Let these participants help you keep the group discussion going; this ensures they participate as well.

**Encourager:** An encourager is typically someone who supports others in their participation. This personality type usually is not a problem unless the group participants do not wish to take part at that time. As a facilitator you want participants to feel open enough to share and to acknowledge when they do make a positive contribution to the group, without being insincere or making the person feel as though they are being mocked. One way to manage an encouraging person is to remind the group that some of the choices people have to make around safer sex are very personal and depend on the situation they are in at that time. We can support people, but we should be aware of the issues around the experience they are sharing or deciding not to share.

You can also re-establish the tone of the group by referring to the group rules, pointing out that the group sessions are to be non-judgmental and open for participants to share when they are comfortable.

Sometimes participants, who encourage others to share, miss the opportunity to talk about their own opinions and feelings.

- ☺ Try to include the participant in the discussions
- ☺ Ask them to volunteer in some type of session exercise

**Information Giver:** An information giver is typically someone providing facts about a topic. While facts can be helpful, they may not be an appropriate response to the matter

being discussed or the “facts” may not be accurate. If a participant begins to provide misinformation, respectfully remind the participants of any relevant handouts or other sources of the facts.

- ☺ Use handouts or other sources to correct any misinformation presented or to prevent misinformation being presented.

**Summarizer:** A summarizer is typically someone who listens to input and offers feedback highlighting what they understand the speaker is saying. Sometimes this feedback can distract the group from clearly understanding the points you want made or can interrupt the sharing that is taking place. As a facilitator, it is important to recognize the value in information shared by the participants but you should summarize information related to the sessions or activities and correct any misperceptions. You can point out to the group that each person’s thoughts are welcomed and the information shared in the group is rich. However, as the facilitator you want to be sure the group does not lose the key points made so you will summarize at the end of each discussion. This should help review key points in case anyone is not clear. Redirect the discussion away from the summarizer and open the topic up to the larger group, if time permits.

You can manage this personality type by staying in your role as a neutral person in the group sessions and recognizing the power that comes with your role. As the facilitator, you are able to create and maintain different characteristics of the group. Interact with the group without becoming a participant in the group or giving your authority to the group. Do not allow the participants to oversee the group process more than they participate in the process. Keep the responsibility for reviewing the highlights before closing out each session.

Acknowledge the importance of reviewing key discussion topics, without being defensive or attacking. This can help maintain respect between you and the participants.

- ☺ Work to keep the participant summarizing engaged in the group discussion.
- ☺ Assign a person who summarizes information a role. Determine a way they can help in the group process while you review the main points at the close of the session.

**Blocker:** A blocker is typically someone who is not open to new ideas or opinions. As a facilitator, it is important to set the right tone of the group where everyone is open to share without making others feel shut-out. If a participant makes comments that silence the discussion, disagrees with another member’s point of view, or is not open to being a part of the group work, use the group rules to remind them that everyone has a right to speak and to have their opinions respected. Another way to manage the blocker is to find out at the beginning of the sessions what participants are expecting to experience. Refer back to the group’s expectations if the blocker persists in trying to dominate the group.

One way to turn the blocker into a helpful participant is to ask them what their opinions are on the current topic. Refer to the group rules emphasizing the sessions are non-judgmental, and then open the discussion back up to the group. Acknowledge valid concerns being raised by the blocker, and allot a limited amount of time to address those

concerns before moving to the next activity. If time does not allow for you to continue the discussion, table the topic until either after the session or the next session.

- ☺ Make yourself available after group sessions to talk through any leftover matters one-on-one and to be sure participants feel as though they were heard and not ignored.

**Dominator:** A dominator is someone who controls the floor in the groups. One way to manage this personality is to refer to the group rules emphasizing that everyone should have a chance to talk. Ask this participant to put themselves in the position of someone with a different opinion or life experience and discuss the topic from that perspective. This can help the dominator gain from the group discussion, as well as opening the discussion to others.

Particularly with larger groups, you may need to establish strict guidelines or special techniques to keep participation fairly equal. For example, you can also distribute two pennies to each group member, explaining that they are to toss a penny into the “thought bucket” every time they contribute to the conversation and to allow others to talk when they run out. Pennies can be redistributed once all the group members have “spent” both their coins or at the beginning of each new topic. That way everyone gets to have their “two cents worth”.

- ☺ Limit the dominator’s participation by calling on other group members and soliciting their opinions.

**Information Seeker:** An information seeker is typically someone asking questions or looking for input from others. When their questions break the flow of the discussion, you can write down such questions on a piece of easel paper to address at the end of the session. Tell the group that there will be time for everyone to share their thoughts and ask for questions at that time.

Use your judgment about which questions to postpone; if the information being sought is directly related to the session and it is not appropriate to wait to address the matter later in the session, do not ignore or dismiss the issue. Ask the group how they wish to handle the matter and agree to how much time will be spent discussing the matter, then refocus on the session activities.

- ☺ If asked a question for which you don’t have the answer, tell participants that you will get back to them at the next session.

## Resources

For more information on facilitating groups, consult the resources listed below.

Florida State University

<http://med.fsu.edu/education/FacultyDevelopment/small%20group%20skills.asp>

W. Brendan Reddy (1994). Intervention Skills: Process Consultation for Small Groups and Teams. Pfeiffer.

Corey, G. (2000). Theory & Practice of Group Counseling. 5<sup>th</sup> Ed. Brooks/Cole Thomson Learning.

2002 Basic Facilitator Primer

<http://www.uiowa.edu/~cqi/2002BasicFacilitationPrimer.pdf>

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