Facilitation Tools

Almost everything that you do as a facilitator to make your meetings more effective and participatory could be called a facilitation tool. A facilitation tool is simply any technique that you use when you're facilitating - everything from making eye contact and actively listening to the group, through to more obvious and formal tools such as small groups and go-rounds *(see overleaf for a glossary of all the tools mentioned here).*

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Informal facilitation tools

Of all the facilitation tools available you'll use the informal tools most often. And yet they're commonly ignored or under-rated. For example, creating a good, safe space for your group to work in is one of the biggest tasks we take on as facilitators. Much of that space is created by our use of our bodies, eyes and voices. If our eye contact is inviting and reassuring, our body language is comfortable and approachable and our voices calm yet energetic we're a long way to our goal. That makes something as simple as breathing a core facilitation tool – taking a few breaths can ground us, and thus help to ground the meeting. So it can be useful to become more aware of what informal tools we're using, how we use them, and how we could do so to greater effect. It's also important to think about any informal tools that are missing from our toolkit, so we can consciously add them in future.

Informal tools include:

breathing, eye contact, a smile, tone of voice, body language, asking appropriate questions, actively listening, humour, opening a window, turning the heating up or down, throwing issues back to the group for decision, taking an unscheduled break, refreshments, offering a summary of the discussion..... and so on.

Formal facilitation tools

There are of course some formal tools that would also help create that same safe space, for example: a group agreement, introductory icebreakers and so on. Many formal tools are planned in advance. Others you will use responsively to help you deal with situations that arise during a meeting. With experience it becomes easier to predict many of the group's needs and plan appropriate tools, reducing the need for using responsive tools. But you will never be able to predict everything.

Ensuring facilitation tools work!

Here's a checklist you can use to remind you what to tell the group in order to ensure that a tool works smoothly. Many of these are common to most tools:

- **Task** – what are you asking the group to do?
- **Aim** – why are you asking them to do it? what's the purpose?
- **Context** - where does this tool fit within the wider meeting process? what happens after this step?
- **Time** – how long have they got to complete the task?
- **Roles** – should they appoint someone to take notes, or to feed back, for example?
- **Materials** – what materials do they need, if any?
- **Space** – which rooms/tables/ spaces are available during the activity?

Formal tools include:

evaluation form, go-round, group agreement, icebreaker, ideastorm, minutes of the meeting, paired listening, 'parking' space, small groups, spectrum line... and more

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Facilitator's Toolkit

Icebreaker – any activity aimed at getting people to know each other better so that they can work together more effectively in the meeting. It doesn't have to be a game, a paired listening activity (see below) can work as well.

Go-round – each person has their say in turn. No interruptions. It can be round a circle, or a 'popcorn' go-round where people speak when ready, regardless of position in the circle, but each person only speaks once. Good for equalising participation and checking where everyone stands in relation to an issue or proposal.

Ideastorm – a quickfire creative thinking tool often used at the start of an agenda item to gather ideas and encourage creative thinking. It's important that people don't critique each other's ideas during the ideastorm. It's uncensored thinking - anything goes! People can storm ideas onto post-it notes and then share them or call out ideas in the full group to be written on flipchart paper.
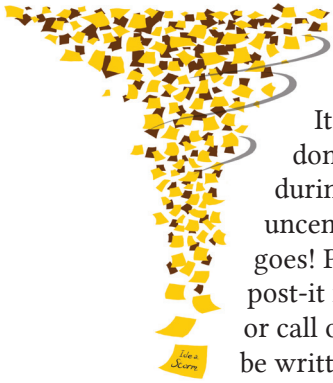
Group agreement – a list of behaviours agreed by the group to help the meeting stay respectful and focused. For example *"no interrupting"*, *"be conscious of time"*, or *"mobile phones off"*.

Paired listening – a time-limited sharing of ideas and experiences in a pair. Sometimes done as a conversation, sometimes with the pair speaking in turn for an equal time. Often followed by feedback to the full group. A good tool for ensuring that even those people who don't like to speak in a large group can make a contribution.

'Parking' space – a large sheet of paper on the wall used to collect ideas for future discussion as they emerge in a meeting. It helps the meeting stay focused on one topic. Other topics are listed on the parking space as they arise and can be dealt with later at an appropriate time.

Small groups – splitting a meeting into smaller groups which either all do the same work in parallel, or each take on a different task. Good for changing the dynamic of the meeting, involving more people in discussion, and getting a lot done in a short time.

Spectrum line – an active discussion tool in which the group physically place themselves on an imagined line depending on their response to questions or scenarios posed by the facilitator. A discussion follows to allow people to say why they are standing in the position that they've chosen. A nice change to being seated.
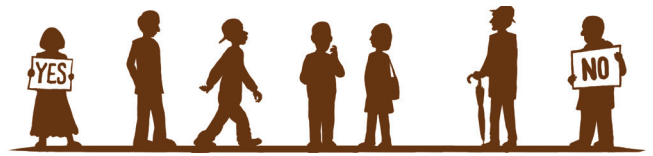
Throwing it back to the group – bouncing questions and decisions back to the group rather than answering them or making them yourself *"that's a good question... does anyone want to suggest an answer?"*
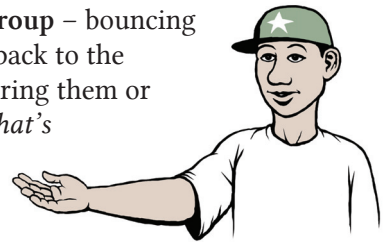
Evaluation – evaluation is crucial if we're going to improve the quality of our meetings. It could be an evaluation form or a quick go-round of *"what worked well?"* and *"what worked less well?"*.

Summarising – regular summaries allow the discussion to develop and to stay focused. They also ensure everyone shares the same understanding of the situation.

Minutes of the meeting – a written record of the meeting, including decisions and agreed action points. Some groups like to flesh minutes out with a description of the different points and opinions raised. Minutes are a vital tool to ensure that ideas are not forgotten, and that they are implemented after the meeting.

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