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# Facilitating Group Discussions

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**Group Discussion Situations**

* To Explore: Group discussions designed to explore one's own views and views of others.
* To Raise Awareness: Group discussions designed to share specific information and to hear about the views and perspectives of others.
* To Decide: Group discussions designed to lead to a group decision.

 The 108th RTP discussions goal based on the situations above is “To Raise Awareness”

**Facilitation Goals**

* Create an environment for effective communication (the achievement of mutual understanding)
* Keep discussion focused
* Keep people engaged.
* Advance and deepen discussion.
* Provide opportunity for all voices to be heard.
* Create environment of trust and support so disagreement and understanding can surface.
* Leave participants challenged and willing to engage in follow-up conversations.

**Preparation**

* **Decide who should facilitate the discussion**. Consider who knows the topic, can assume an "objective" role, will be accepted by the group and has group experience. Consider what you know about the topic, whether your views are known to students, and whether that makes your role as a facilitator too difficult.
* **Consider co-facilitating with another person**. Whenever possible, use co-facilitators who represent different gender, racial or cultural backgrounds, especially when discussing personal or emotional issues.
* **Know yourself before you begin as a facilitator**. Consider:
  + What are my personal beliefs, values and stereotypes about the issue?
  + Can I assume an objective role in the discussion?
  + What role should I assume as a facilitator?
  + How do I establish trust and openness among the group?
  + How do I show respect for the opinions of others?
  + How do I tactfully mediate conflict?
  + How do I keep discussion flowing smoothly?
  + How do I encourage the participation of everyone and avoid domination by a few?
  + How do I deal with someone showing disrespect for another?
  + What should I do when I don't know how to respond to a comment or question?
  + Will I feel comfortable facilitating a group discussion on this issue?
* **Identify the goals of the session**. What are you trying to accomplish?
* **Plan the format of the discussion.** Will it be a small group? a large group? a group of people who know each other well? only somewhat? not at all? Will it be formal (see the suggested discussion models attached in Appendix B) or informal?
* **Schedule tentative time blocks**, so that the introduction and key points will be covered before the end of the discussiion.
* **Plan the physical environment** so that participants can talk to each other (not just to you) without visual or height barriers. Hint: people sitting in circles tend to talk more with each other, rather than focus on the facilitation.
* **Be prepared with some interesting/challenging questions** to get discussion started and to keep moving.
* **Plan for any materials or help** you will need. Will you need a writing surface such as a blackboard, or newsprint and marker pens. If it is an event where you will be writing down information, ideas, choose someone else to be the recorder. Hint: It is very hard to facilitate a discussion and be the one doing the recording.

**Starting Off**

* **Introduce the purpose** of the discussion and ensure that the participants have the same understanding.
* **Explain the organization and structure** (including the time line) of the discussion, when it will end, and whether or not there are formal follow-up plans. ("We'll speak in small groups for an hour then spend a half-hour in general discussion. We will end at 9 p.m. and anyone who wants to continue the discussion can stay in the lounge. Depending on interest we will have a follow-up discussion on Thursday night.")
* **Explain your role as facilitator** - a person whose role it is to remain neutral or objective, to keep the discussion focused and energized and to create an environment for all to have a chance to participate. This does not mean that you are neutral and have no opinions, but as a facilitator you need to play an objective role.
* **Set the appropriate tone**. Show your comfort with the topic so that others feel comfortable. Create a safe and open environment so that the participants will feel comfortable and share their views openly and honestly.

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| "I (we) am (are) here to help us have a good discussion about .... We are here to learn from one another, to get a sense about how we think and feel about ...., and to help us make stronger and deeper connections with one another. Our job as facilitators is to help us have a good discussion where all views can be voiced in a safe and respectful environment. That doesn't mean that there won't be disagreement and some tension about important issues. We hope that you will say what is on your mind. We understand the challenge we all face in sharing some of our experiences and vulnerabilities with each other. To create a safe and respectful atmosphere we ask that all of us follow a few groundrules." |

* **Do introductions**. How you do the introductions will help set the tone for the discussion--the amount of information and the degree of self-disclosure that will occur.
* **Establish groundrules** for the discussion so that the participants feel the environment is safe to speak about their ideas and feelings. Groundrules should be explicit. You need to take a little time to discuss the cultural relativity of these groundrules. Groundrules may not fit everyone because we have different cultural backgrounds. Ask the group if these rules make sense and if everyone can honor them. The following are some suggestions (add your own):
  + We ask that you speak from your own perspective; personal **"I" statements** are useful ways for keeping your view points personalized, and keep you from generalizing about what others think or feel
  + We ask that you respect the viewpoints of others--that you **listen respectfully** and attentively, and that you withhold judgment about other's views. Our goal here is not to persuade each other of our ideas, but to get ideas out on the table so people can make their own decision.
  + We ask that you maintain **confidentiality** about what is said in the room during this discussion--that you don't talk about what others say here to others who are not part of this discussion.
  + To show your respect for others in the room, we ask that you stay focused on the discussion and **avoid side conversations**. We ask that you make a conscious effort to listen actively to hear what is being said.
  + We expect that everyone here will try to make this experience a good one; that **we are all responsible** for how this discussion goes.
  + We ask that you be willing to voice disagreements, but we ask that if you disagree with someone's idea that you **criticize the idea, not the person**. With sensitive issues, people make take things personally. Please try to be sensitive to each other's needs and concerns. Try to speak up if you feel hurt in anyway. Avoid derogatory or sarcastic comments at the expense of others.
  + We ask that you **don't interrupt** each other.
  + **All questions are good ones**. We encourage you to ask questions of each other no matter how simplistic you might think they are. Chances are there are others who have the same question. The goal of the discussion is to learn and explore.
  + We ask that you**limit your exchanges** with one person to no more than 3 exchanges. If it goes beyond three then others need the chance to express their opinion.
  + We ask that you **don't make assumptions** about what others think or mean. Remember that others will not always attach the same meanings to words that you do or perceive the world the same way you do.
  + (A useful ground rule for managing hurt) We will **establish an "ouch" list** as we go along. We ask that you write down any statements that hurt you and post them on the wall. We will agree to discuss the "ouches" at some point in the discussion.
* Find out if some **people are leaving early or coming late** and decide how you want to deal with that.

**Getting the Discussion Started**

* Pose an interesting question or set of questions. Remember to come to the discussion with some prepared questions.
* Open questions requiring more than a "yes" or "no" response (as opposed to closed questions which lead to a one word response) generate discussion and stimulate thinking. (keywords: "how", "why", "what", "what if", "tell us about")

"How do you feel about the points made in the presentation?"

"What in your experience has led you to the view that you just expressed?"

* Group oriented questions encourage group participation and tend to stimulate everyone's thinking. (keywords: "who", "anyone")

"Would anyone be willing to share their reactions to the program?"

"Does anyone have any ideas about how we should start this discussion?"

"Does anyone have an issue or concern that they would like to raise to get us started?"

"What experiences have any of you had with this issue?"

* Individual oriented questions encourage individual response (but may put people on the spot) and can tap known resources of a "expert" in the group:

"Tom, what do you think about the issues raised in the article?"

"Allison, how do you feel about what is happening in the dorm now, on the topic of X?"

" Eric, you have done a lot of reading in this area, how do you see the issue?"

* Factual questions seek information. (keywords: "what", "which", "how much")

"What are some of the major pros and cons from your perspective?"

"What statements did you actually hear made during the presentation that made you upset?"

"Who on campus is best suited to talk further about this issue?"

**During the Discussion**

**Checking Yourself**

* **Remain neutral** (objective and open). This does not mean that you don't have opinions, but facilitators usually do not offer their own views; they help group members share theirs. Your role is to facilitate the group's discussion. If you have valuable ideas or opinions that are essential to what is being discussed, put your facilitator role aside and ask someone else to act as facilitator while you give your inp

"How do some of the rest of you feel about that?"

"That may be your experience, but others may see things differently. Do any of you have a counter example or opinion.?"

"I have an opinion I would like to share, so I am taking my facilitator hat off for a comment."

* **Stay off the soapbox**. Successful facilitators listen rather than talk. Watch for danger signals:

- Talking too much

- Feeling the need to address all questions

- Talking more than your co-facilitator(s)

- Seeing the group interacting more with you rather than with each other

- Engaging in dialogue with individual members of the group

* **Avoid being put in the position of the "expert".** Some may look to you to provide the answers to challenging questions or situations. Refrain from immediately providing "your answer" to the issue at hand. Turn the situation back to the questioner or ask the question of the whole group. If you are stuck or lost, admit it honestly to the group; someone is almost always likely to come to your rescue.

" How would you handle that?"

* S**tay aware of your own "hot buttons"**. Know where you stand on the issues, where your own prejudices/biases lie and where you are in your own personal discovery. If you feel you won't shut down discussion you could own up to them at the very beginning of the discussion and say that although you have deep feelings about the issue, you are committed to creating an environment where all feelings can be heard and respected.

**Gatekeeping**

* **Acknowledge contributions**, validate people's ideas, and give credit where credit is due.

"Thanks for saying that Linda. No one had mentioned that before."

"Thanks for that helpful contribution. It is not easy to share such a personal experience. That was very courageous."

"Dave, I appreciate your offering a different view."

"You made a strong general statement, Mary. Is that what you think (or feel)?"

"Could you restate your point using 'I' instead of 'we' or 'you' or 'people think'?

* **Keep the focus on ideas** not individuals. Some ways to do this are:

- Ask the group to brainstorm ideas - Ask the group to identify pros and cons of a position rather than having individuals explain or defend a position

- Divide the group in half, being sure each half includes representatives of different viewpoints and ask each group to develop one side of the argument

- Go around the circle asking everyone to say something about the topic and indicate in what ways they agree with previous speakers. Then ask a recorder to summarize the primary feelings expressed by the group

- Create small groups, each with a reporter who will bring ideas of the small group back to the whole group

- Redirect people who make personal comments about others.

* Try to **keep the discussion concrete** rather than abstract. People tend to talk abstractly especially when dealing with uncomfortable topics. Suggesting that people share real experiences can be effective.

"Can you give an example of what you are talking about from your own experience?"

* **Keep the focus on the subject** without restraining free expression of ideas.

"You have made an interesting point, but how would you say that relates to X (the topic under discussion)?"

"It seems that we have started another topic without finishing the first. Should we return to the issue we were discussing before going on?"

* Get participants to "own" their comments rather than speaking in generalizations about what others think.
* **Summarize or synthesize statements** as a way of keeping track and bringing focus on where the discussion is going/has gone.

"Some of the main points I have heard are..."

"What were some of the main themes here tonight?"

"Can someone give a brief distillation of the discussion that we just had?"

* **Be patient with silences**. Don't jump to fill in silence. Silence can be an important time for some and may spur others to talk.
* Know and **emphasize the importance of pause time**. Encourage each person to be aware of their own pause time before jumping in. As a facilitator don't jump in too quickly.
* **Read non-verbal cues**. Are a few people dominating the discussion? Are there many interruptions? Observe who is participating and who is not? Are people looking bored? Angry? Impatient? What is the level of energy in the discussion?

"People seem a little restless, why don't we take a break."

"It looks as if people are uncomfortable with what we have just been discussing."

"The energy of this discussion seems low, should we wind this up for now?"

* **Pose disagreement constructively**. If there is disagreement and the discussion is stuck, have the participants agree to disagree and move on to another subject.

"Can we explore each of the viewpoints as a group and try to understand them rather than having one or to persons defend each view."

"It's clear that there is not agreement on this issue which is perfectly fine. Can we all agree not to be in agreement on this and move on to consider another facet of this issue.."

* **Minimize attacks.** Protect individuals and their ideas from attack by other members of the group.

"Let's remember our groundrule about not attacking each other."

* **Minimize disruptions** such as inappropriate humor, people walking in and out, private/side conversations, etc. Confront other problem behaviors that interfere with the progress of the discussion. (See Troubleshooting below)

"It is really hard to focus on what is being said here. There are so many side conversations."

**Encouraging Participation**

* **Create (and recreate) a safe and trusting environment**. Monitor excessive talkers (see Troubleshooting below) and prompt the quieter members. - Consider breaking up into smaller groups or pairs(dyads) or trios for mini-discussions as a way to involve the quieter people

"We hope that you will say what is on your mind. What we say here today is for the group and will not go beyond the group."

* **Set and reinforce a pattern for participants to talk to each other**, not to you. Keep reminding the group that this is conversation/questioning focuses on you.
* **Notice silences.** Who is talking a lot, who is not talking? Is there any pattern?

"The men in the group have been pretty quiet. We'd be interested in what you think."

"I have noticed that some of you have not said what you think. I hope you will find a way to let us hear from you at some point" (be careful of this kind of statement; it may put people on the spot)."

" I have noticed that some of you haven't said anything. Please feel free to jump in at any point."

"John, you made some good points; let's hear from someone else."

* **Acknowledge the feelings of people in the group**.

"Sam, I can see how upset you are. what would you like to hear from the group?"

"I bet you are not the only one here who has that reaction. Has anyone else ever felt the same way?"

* **Ask individuals and the group how to respond to expressions of emotions.**

"It seems to me that the discussion has brought up painful feelings for several people. What shall we do at this point? Would you like to talk about feelings that have been expressed? do you want to keep going? Shall we take a break?"

"This seems to be where a lot of discussions on this issue break down--how can we keep going and get past this point?"

"When I see people angry it is hard for me to listen because I am worried about people getting (emotionally/physically) hurt. Could we just take a minute here to breathe, and make sure we can talk about this respectfully"

* **Reaffirm that the group is trying to deal with emotionally difficult issues.**

"People are expressing many different and deep emotions here which may feel hard and uncomfortable, but that is the reason we are all here, to try to come to grips with emotionally difficult issues."

"It's not easy to share such a deeply held beliefs"

**Advancing and Deepening the Discussion**

* **Invite amplification of new points**. Encourage the contributors to explain the background behind their ideas/opinions. o Help "fact spouters" get more personal.

"What is your opinion, given the facts as you have said them?"

"When I here those facts, it makes me feel like.....?"

"These are interesting facts; would you like to share how you feel about them?."

* **Encourage people to take risks**

- Take some risks yourself, including admitting your mistakes

- Take a risk yourself and be vulnerable by sharing a personal experience or risky feeling

* Ask**open-ended questions.** (What?, How?, Why?)
* Ask **follow-up and/or probing questions** (if others don't).

"Can you say a little more about that?"

"What do you mean by that?" "Can you give us an example?"

"How did you come to this view?."

"What convinced you of your opinion?"

* **Paraphrase** (or getting others to paraphrase) what people say; paraphrasing can help legitimize people's views, and is especially useful in legitimizing an unpopular or risky opinion/idea.

"As I understand what you are saying, ..."

"Let me see if I understand what you are saying, ..."

* **Clarify**, without interpreting.

"Can you clarify that last comment, I am not sure that I understood what you were saying."

"Can I try to clarify what I think you just said."

"Can you restate that in a different way?"

"What do you mean by that?"

* **Call attention to alternative viewpoints.** Beware of "group think" Sometimes a group will discuss a topic without awareness of a different approach to the same problem.
* **Encourage feelings as well as ideas**. Remember that "I feel like..." and "I feel that ..." are not statements of feelings. Feelings are expressions of emotions -- anger, frustration, joy, happiness, etc.  
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**Troubleshooting During the Discussion**

* **No one responds**.

- Ask for any comments

- Suggest an answer and ask for agreement or disagreement

* **Someone who doesn't take the discussion seriously or gives silly comments.**

- Find something in their answer that is close to a serious answer and in a serious tone repeat it to the group.

- Ask them if they can think of another answer

- Compliment them when they give a serious answer

"I think most people are here because they think the topic is a valuable one. Does anyone feel differently about this?"

"Please try to respect other people's feelings here; this is a serious issue."

"I know that laughter can mean that people are nervous or feeling uncomfortable. Does anyone have any special concerns?"

* **People monopolize the discussion**.

- Say, "I'd like to hear what the rest of the group has to say."

- Ask another person a question just as soon as they pause.

- Ask for agreement or disagreement from others.

- Explain that you appreciate their comments, but it is important for everyone to have a chance to talk.

- Establish ground rules at the beginning (or mid-stream) that one of the goals is to provide everyone an opportunity to share.

* **Someone keeps changing the subject or goes on tangents.**

-Say, "That is very interesting but how do you feel about .....?"

-Refocus their attention by saying "I know you are enjoying sharing your experience with each other, but there are some issues I would like to share with you now."

- Say, "In order to accomplish our goal today, we really need to move on. Perhaps we can go back to this topic later."

* **People keep interrupting.**

"Could we remember just to have one person talk at a time and let people finish their statements."

"Okay..first Sarah, then Randy, then Marie."

"Jim, you have got a lot of god point, but it is important to let Renee finish, and then I know that Tom is dying to say something as well."

* **Hostile or belligerent group members**

-Keep your cool. Try to incorporate negative comments in a positive way. "That's an (interesting, unique, different) way to look at this situation. I appreciate your contributing that different point of view."

-If it continues, try to meet with the person at a break and confront them on their behavior. If it is really disruptive, tell them that if they choose to stay, you would like their cooperation. o Someone puts another person down.

-Remind the group that there are no wrong answers. Everyone has the right to his/her opinion.

* **The group gets stuck** (lacks sufficient information to go on) Refer to resources. Suggest the need for further information if you or someone else in the discussion does not know the answer.
* **Inappropriate humor**

- Don't let inappropriate humor go by.

" I realize that you may not have intended it, but this is a pretty sensitive topic, and that kind of humor makes a lot of people very uncomfortable."

"I don't find that remark very funny personally. Were you aware that some people might find that remark offensive?"

* **You are running out of time.**

- Don't panic or start rushing. Get as far as you can. - Prioritize questions/points. Try to address the important ones

- Decide on a time for a follow-up session o Someone challenges your role as group leader.

- Don't become defensive. Let the group air their dissatisfactions. Express your feelings after they have cooled off. Discuss solutions with the group.

* **People keep addressing their questions to you.**

- Redirect the question to the group

- If no one in the group has a response, defer the question by having someone in the group come back with pertinent information at a later time.

* **Conflict occurs**

- Don't take sides

- Remind people of the areas of agreement - Ask people in conflict to agree to restate what they heard before they state their arguments.

- Remind people that they are not there to judge others or to persuade others of their views, but to further mutual understanding.

- Summarize the conflict and ask for ideas from the whole group as to how to proceed.

- Acknowledge the disagreement and agree to move on. Tell the group that conflict is a healthy part of group dynamics, and can enhance learning.

- Try to put yourself in each person's position and try to understand the emotional impact that the situation is creating for them. Empathize verbally with each side.

- Acknowledge each persons concerns and needs.

- Try to elicit where each persons ideas may have come from in their experience.

* **Inability to move to another topic because people are overly engaged in a lively discussion**

- Try to be flexible about time. If something good is happening, assess the value of leaving that discussion in favor of completing an agenda. Get the group to help make this decision.

- Give a two-minute warning or some other transition time to prepare the group to change direction.

- Acknowledge at the beginning of the session that time will be a factor and that some issues may not be discussed.

- Acknowledge the difficulty of leaving a good discussion and get the group to decide how to proceed, or set up another time to finish the agenda.

* **Something inappropriate is stated, i.e., something offensive, misinformation**

- Legitimize dissenting opinions/ideas. Don't let misinformation stand. It implies that you agree with it. Ask for other opinions/ideas ("Are there other views?" "Does everyone agree?"

- Agree to disagree to give people space to object without destroying the discussion.

- Acknowledge discomfort over a comment...but own it as your discomfort. Don't speak for the group.

**Wrapping Up**

* **Keep to the committed ending time,** unless you ask the group if they would like to continue for a specified period of time. (Remember, ending a little too soon is better than discussing a topic to death. Ending on a high note will encourage the discussion to continue at a later time.) Indicate that you will stay around for a while if anyone else wishes to continue the discussion.
* **Summarize (or have a participant summarize) the major thrust**of the discussion**.**

- The major points of agreement and disagreement, if appropriate.

- Issues that were discussed but not resolved

- Where action has been agreed on, the decision should be stated and the next steps and person responsible should be identified.

* Comment on (or have the group comment on)**how the discussion went**

- How do participants feel about their own participation? - What was good about the discussion and what could have been better?

- Did people feel free to express their opinions?

- Do they have suggestions for better facilitation?

- Did people feel free to express their opinions?

* If appropriate, help the group decide what the **next steps** should be if any. Decide if people want to continue the discussion at a later time. Determine a starting point for the next discussion. Decide if people who did not attend the first discussion should attend the second.
* Emphasize the **commitment to confidentiality** and sensitivity to the comments shared by members of the group.
* Indicate that you (and other residence staff members) will also **be available** to discuss related issues at another time, especially if this discussion has brought up difficult or painful experiences.
* **Thank everyone** for the discussion...for their honest participation, etc.

**Post Discussion Review**

After the discussion is over, take a few minutes (with your co-facilitator) to reflect on the content and process of the discussion; a few written notes for future reference might be helpful. Consider:

* How well did the group stay focused on the topic? What contributed to this?
* How did the structure and timing contribute to the discussion? What changes, if any, would you make?
* How involved were individuals in the discussion? Were there any individuals noticeably silent, angry or upset? Usually, it is best to avoid questioning or confronting the behavior afterwards, but it may be important to keep your eye on the individual. Sometime the behavior you observed in the discussion might indicate serious personal difficulties. If in doubt what to do consult with your RF or RD.

Seek feedback from others (other staff members present or participants). You will learn much from seeking feedback from others, especially from your co-facilitator or other staff members. Ask what you did that went well (what you did to keep the discussion moving, motivate others to take risks and set the appropriate tone., etc.) and what improvements they would recommend.