

## Civic Reflection

### How to Lead a Discussion

You have a group. You've planned your discussion. You're ready to go in there and... do what exactly? Below are some facilitation tips to consider as you lead a discussion.

#### FACILITATION TIPS

- **Learn and use names** and encourage participants to do the same. This will help to personalize the conversation and the experience.
- **Pay attention to the people in the room.** Who wants to join the conversation? Who's thinking? Who's checked out? Scan the room, make eye contact and invite people into the conversation.
- **Shift attention from yourself to the people in the room.** Ask questions, but try to float them out there in a calm, non-interrogative way. The aim is for the group to have a conversation, not for them to treat you as their teacher. Encourage participants to talk to one another -- not just to you.
- **Keep track of time.** Sit somewhere you can see a clock or have a watch or cell phone nearby so participants can pay attention to the conversation, not the clock.
- **Consider small group work.** You'll want to find as many ways to invite personal experiences into the discussion and to give participants the opportunity to connect with one another. Small groups can be an excellent way of doing this.
- **Don't be rigid, go with the flow.** The conversation is more important than getting to your next question. You may have a detailed plan but will likely find that the participants want to take things in a different direction. Think about how you can connect, build on and follow up on the ideas that participants raise.
- **Be aware of your own agenda.** Avoid answering your own questions or affirming one perspective over another. Think about how your actions might influence how comfortable participants feel bringing their own perspectives to the table.
- **Be comfortable with silence.** Silence always feels longer and more awkward for the facilitator than it does for the people in the room. What, to you, may feel like hostility or resistance, may just be a sign that people are thinking. Resist the temptation to immediately ask follow up questions or answer questions yourself.
- **Get everyone involved.** If you have a lot of people wanting to talk, will you start a queue or will that stifle the flow of the conversation? If you have one person dominating, how can you bring other voices into the mix?
- **Encourage differences to emerge.** Nothing kills conversation more than cheap consensus. Any group will have important differences of opinion, no matter how unified they seem at

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first. Help people perceive and explore them by inviting varied perspectives and interpretations.

#### TROUBLESHOOTING

Many discussions run into trouble. If any tension does arise, people will be watching you, the facilitator, to see how you react. There are a number of techniques that we at CCR have found helpful in handling these troubles:

- **Anticipate and prepare for difficulties.** What you do at the beginning of the discussion and how you carry yourself throughout can go a long way in dealing with tension before it even arises. Think about how you can create a space where people feel comfortable airing their opinions--and disagreements--without spilling over into conflict. Do you want to set expectations at the beginning of your discussion? How will you model the right attitudes for your participants?
- **Name the tension in the room.** It might be tempting to bury your head in the sand and pretend that an offensive comment wasn't said or to move on quickly if a touchy topic is raised. However, naming the tension - "It seems like things have become a little heated...?" - helps participants relax and know you're being real.
- **Trust the group.** As a facilitator, it's easy to feel that you need to solve every problem yourself. However, sometimes the best thing to do is to throw it back to the group: "It seems that people are reluctant to talk about this—am I right to sense that? Where does this reluctance come from?"
- **Return to the object.** The object (reading, image, video, etc.) is neutral, it can't be offended, and hopefully it's something that encourages a range of perspectives and interpretations. If things get uncomfortable, returning to the object can deflect attention back to the topic at hand and bring new voices into the conversation.
- **Treat people as individuals.** There is no right way to deal with participants who are causing problems. If you have a dominator, you might want to think about turning your body away from him/her, inviting other contributions from the group or speaking to them individually during a break. If you have participants who are reluctant to speak, you might want to keep making eye contact or ask them directly if they have something to add. What works is different for different people.
- **Difficulties are opportunities.** Yes, it's cheesy but it's true. Conflict and tension are often a sign that people are engaged and invested in the conversation. How can you turn tension into a constructive discussion?

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**SIGNS OF SUCCESS**

It's not all doom and gloom -- most civic reflection discussions have very clear signs of success. There are many things to look for, but common indicators include:

- **Humor, smiles and a palpable energy** in the room
- **Everyone participates**
- People are **talking directly to each other**, not directing all of their comments or questions to the facilitator
- The **discussion continues** in large or small groups after the formal end of the session
- People are **talking with each other more** than they were before the discussion
- People are **talking with different people than usual**
- Participants tell you how much **they enjoyed it!**