

Quick Guide: Facilitating Discussion Groups

Enabling discussions within a group and reaching a conclusion or compromise can be challenging. Watch and listen how the Dimbleby brothers manage Question Time and any questions! It takes a great deal of skill and a lot of patience. So here are the top ten tips to help you the next time you have to facilitate a discussion group:

- 1. Watch yourself!** Face to face situations are very important occasions because all aspects of your behaviour are simultaneously on show: what you look like, what you say, together with all the non-verbal communication.
- 2. Do your preparation.** Find out whether the task/problem/subject matter is complex or routine and research your participants: their experience and, on balance, who has the most knowledge.
- 3. Consider how much time you have available.** If time is very tight, might this lead to a crisis? This will help you decide if commitment from everyone is essential or just desirable.
- 4. Consider what the participants may want** eg to achieve a sound objective or make plans to do so, to influence, persuade or impress others, to not show they are out of their depth or lacking in confidence?
- 5. Be careful not to be non-judgemental.** While your own views may be at odds with the group, your role is to facilitate the process.
- 6. Follow the discussion** and don't let the discussion group go round in circles, so people get locked into an information loop. It goes like this: A asks a question to clarify something; B provides clarification. C clarifies the clarification; D adds more information; E asks for more information, D provides more information. A asks a question to clarify something, B provides clarification. And so on!
- 7. Control the discussion** group and get people to the point. Use words like: "so what you are saying is...", "Have we got this right ...?", "So, in conclusion...".
- 8. Some discussions groups can degenerate into mayhem** – with some "hogging the floor" and others withdrawing completely. Your job as facilitator is to ensure all present get a fair chance to contribute.
- 9. Consider how any resulting actions will be recorded** and who will take responsibility to follow through. (I hear another discussion topic coming!)
- 10. You may have to agree to disagree!** But at least you will have enabled all the participants to have their say: you will have fostered open discussion.

Compiled by Val Tyler