



Facilitator's Guide
to the

Holding Environment

The Holding Environment is a central “place” where adaptive work takes place. Leaders create holding environments to engage diverse voices in identifying adaptive and technical work. In that space, they must ensure that all voices are protected and have an opportunity to be heard, keep an eye on the level of distress and either increase it or decrease it with compassion and care, and help interested parties commit and contribute to the work. Leaders do not create holding environments as disinterested parties. In fact, they must remain committed to the process of sharing adaptive work while they engage as interested participants. This document provides guidance for leaders called upon to facilitate AND participate.

Actions of a Trusted Facilitator:

- Creates a space where all participants feel comfortable and supported in addressing issues
- Unifies the group at every opportunity, emphasizing mutual respect and trust
- Believes that every individual has a valuable contribution to make and commits to making space for those contributions
- Understands that there are varied interests, that are sometimes stated as positions, and encourages expression and clarification of those interests while balancing the views of others
- Recognizes that controversy conflict and heated debate may arise. Normalizes the experience of conflict and regulates distress so that participants stay committed to the work
- Recognizes that different levels of comfort offering opinions in a group and so provides multiple avenues to contribute
- Calls upon participants, gauging their level of confidence in speaking publicly and encouraging them to participate at their comfort level
- Keeps the momentum going and encourages the group to define goals, tasks and timeframes for accomplishment

Strategies for Effective Dialogue

Use these topics to create norms for the group operate. Offer them in conversation to set up the space.

This is an opportunity for the leaders to engage as a participant (“this is what is important to me”) as well as a facilitator (“what does confidentiality mean to everyone?”). It is important when playing both roles to step out of facilitator role once in a while. Be transparent when doing so (“now stepping into a different role”).

1. **Set expectations to create the environment:** Asking participants what they need from each other and what they will commit to in service of the group and work is a good way to start to create an atmosphere of safety and trust. Participants should address confidentiality as an expectation. What does it mean, what does the work require, and are there organizational limitations on withholding information for any one are all good questions to start that conversation.
2. **Openness:** Create an expectation of openness to hearing the information others provide. Encourage participants to listen carefully to what they are saying. Remind them of the following “You don’t have to accept everything you hear.... just take it in and think about it”.



3. **Avert Dumping or Blaming (no “put-downs”):** Immediately avert participants blaming other participants for the ills of society or for negative experiences caused by others. It is counterproductive and diminishes trust.
4. **Self-Responsibility:** Encourage participants to take responsibility for themselves, their thoughts and their actions. Encourage them to honestly identify their own attitudes, beliefs and behavior. Remind them that they are not responsible for how others learn or for changes in their attitudes or behavior.
5. **Take Risks:** Encourage participants to share bold ideas, step outside of the norm and be willing to express those opinions or issues that may be difficult to convey. Adaptive work does not have easily identifiable solutions and so it is a perfect time to be creative.
6. **Time-management:** Talk about your role to keep the group moving forward. This may mean managing individual contributions, both encouraging and gently redirecting.
7. **Have Fun:** Working on adaptive challenges doesn't have to be a tedious process.

Encouraging Participation in Meetings

- Review the purpose and objective(s) at the start of the session to orient participants to the nature of the discussion.
- Remind participants of the principle of shared learning and the need to have everyone participate.
- Balance, with transparency, when you offer opinions yourself and when you draw out participants' ideas and thoughts.
- Ask participants who are not contributing for their thoughts or opinions. (“Curious about how this is sounding to you...”)
- Ask people who have not contributed to play “devil's advocate” for an idea that's been presented. (set this up with care so the one with the idea does not feel attacked)
- Acknowledge contributions by indicating in other ways that the contribution is helpful (e.g., “Very interesting...” or “That should improve the...” or “That's a new way of looking at the problem”). Restate or summarize when appropriate.
- Encourage people to generate new ideas or approaches. Offer a mix of ideas to test out.
- Encourage a healthy discussion of all ideas. Those that sound the most audacious sometimes have the most promise.
- Accept and explore all points of view.
- Assign individuals to summarize key discussion points at the end of the session.



A Process for Helping a Group To Prioritize

Use this technique to help a group clarify the relative importance or impact of ideas presented. This is also a way to obtain consensus among a group.

1. Post these definitions of priority on a flip chart:

1 = most importance or impact
2 = medium importance or impact
3 = least importance or impact

2. Review the definitions with participants and ask them to assign a priority to the ideas under discussion.
3. Either ask for a show of hands and count the number of "1's," "2's," and "3's" for each suggestion (to obtain a general consensus on priorities); or survey the group visually, looking for verbal and non-verbal signs of agreement or disagreement.
4. Another way to do this is to give everyone 2-4 colored dot stickers and ask them to place them by the ideas that are the most important or impactful to them.

Moving Toward Consensus

To keep the discussion focused, identify areas of general agreement first and leave topics on which there are differences to the next discussion.

Here is an example:

1. After the group has identified several suggestions (e.g., for population), poll the group for consensus for priority. (See above for tips on prioritization)
2. Mark each item of general agreement with an identifying symbol (check mark).
3. When you reach an item on which there is a substantial difference of opinion, say something like: "We'll discuss this one in a few minutes since there seems to be a difference of opinion."
4. When you have reviewed all items on the list, return to the items on which there were differences of opinion.



Moving Toward Resolving Differences

To focus discussion on a topic on which there are different opinions, it's helpful to structure it around interests and positions. Breaking the positions (or stated goals) down to understand interests and why they are important offers the opportunity to see agreement in smaller details even if positions are divergent.

- Post a flip chart to record all of the interests. Ask the participants to identify where there is convergence and where there is divergent.
- Refer to the flip chart, saying something like: "Where do interests seem to be consistent or converge? If they seem divergent, are they exclusive?" Keep the flip chart visible throughout the discussion.
- If the differences of opinion are strong, record the group's responses on the flip chart so everyone can see the differences of opinion.

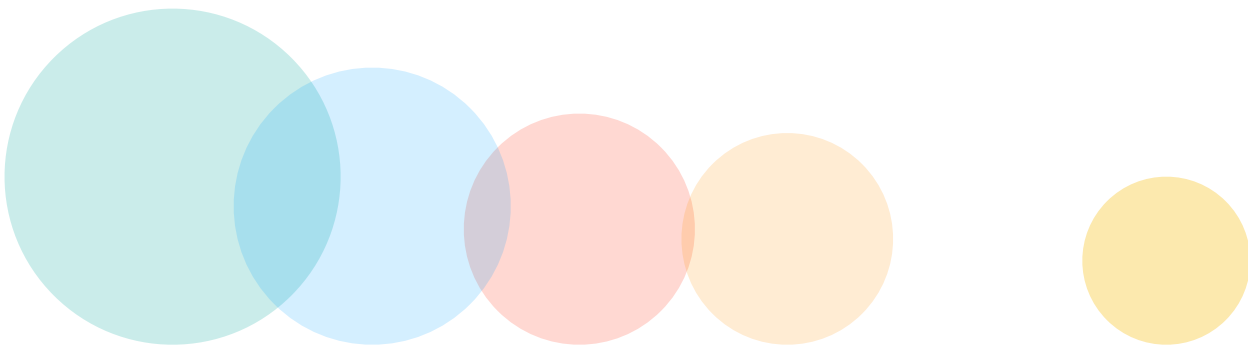
Handling Distracting Behaviors

- **Rambling discussions** – Return to the purpose for the holding environment and ask for engagement them or ask how the person's comments relate to the topic at hand.
- **Off-the-point comments or discussions** – Indicate that the person's comment is interesting and that there may be others in the group who would like to discuss it on a break. And a parking lot (flip chart paper) can be put up to capture ideas that are off topic, but to be returned to.
- **Raising topics that will be covered later** – Mention that there will be full opportunity to discuss this topic in another session (indicate when).
- **One or a few dominating discussion** – Keep participants from dominating the discussion by calling on others or offering your own contribution (with transparency).
- **Latecomers** – In your norms you can ask for late or absent individuals to take responsibility for catching themselves up so you don't have to stop the meeting to "catch them up." If you are referring to handouts, ask latecomers to look on with someone else and give them a copy at a break.
- **Arguments or clashes** – Restate the essence of each person's point of view and find connection when possible. Determine the impact of distress on the ability of the group to proceed. Sometimes the argument or disagreement is surfacing critical topics for the group to address. However, if the process or content is too overwhelming for a group to proceed, a break and check in with those in disagreement may be necessary.



Communication Guidance

1. In the norm setting phase, acknowledge that “we all see facts in a variety of ways.”
2. Listen actively to participants and restate their comments to confirm that you have understood their point and affirm their contribution.
3. Demonstrate “hearing the speaker” by writing (using flip chart or identify note-taker) and reading the notes out loud to the group periodically.
4. If a participant is repetitious or is talking for a while, respectfully interject with a statement such as: “We really appreciate your contribution and would like to hear what others have to say.”
5. If the behavior persists – take the participant aside and check for concerns that they are not being heard, and address them. Convey the consequences of dominating the conversation – others cannot participate equally and will feel marginalized or left out.
6. If discussion goes off point, respectfully and intentionally bring the conversation back to the purpose.
7. If a participant interrupts another, intervene respectfully and ask that the first person complete the point he/she is making, then ask: “Now what is your perspective on this?” Open it up to others, as well as the person who interrupted initially.
8. When asking questions, frequently repeat the need for one point or example and succinct answers. As soon as a person makes his/her first point, immediately turn your attention to another participant. This cuts off multiple answers or long answers. You can also use written contributions or round robin strategies where you limit the time of the contribution



Change the focus to
your performance

Facilitator Checklist

- ☐ Was I well prepared?
- ☐ Did I state the purpose and seek engagement at the beginning?
- ☐ Did I talk loud enough for all group members to hear?
- ☐ Did the discussion flow at a good pace?
- ☐ Did we accomplish our meeting goal?
- ☐ Were my notes easy to read?
- ☐ Did all group members offer input?
- ☐ Did the group come to a consensus on the given topic?
- ☐ As the facilitator, what did I do well?
- ☐ Did I engage as a participant? Did I transition in between?
- ☐ What could I have done differently?
- ☐ If there was conflict within the team, was I able to engage it appropriately?
- ☐ Did I challenge the team to think critically?
- ☐ Did I invite everyone to participate?
- ☐ Was I assertive by getting to the point?
- ☐ Were participants engaged and motivated?
- ☐ Was conflict leveraged to surface and address adaptive work?
- ☐ Was the entire group involved in thinking through difficult issues?
- ☐ Did members share diverse perspectives in a non-confrontational manner?
- ☐ Did the group achieve consensus?
- ☐ Was a large group effectively led through complex facilitation challenges?
- ☐ Were practical tools used to initiate and sustain an organizational or community change?





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