

A GUIDE TO

# FACILITATION SKILLS



London Cultural Improvement Programme (LCIP)  
on behalf of London Councils

# THIS GUIDE

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This is one of a series of Guidance Notes produced in regard to the Community Engagement and Best Practice in Public Consultation conference held on 23 March 2011.

It is part of the London Cultural Improvement Programme, on behalf of London Councils. The Consultation Institute (TCI) was commissioned to design, deliver and manage the conference in addition to producing a number of guides. This Guide is one of two, the other being: Stakeholder Management and Mapping.



**The Consultation Institute**  
[www.consultationinstitute.org](http://www.consultationinstitute.org)

These notes were designed by Participate Ltd March 2011  
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# CONTENTS

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<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b> <a href="#">READ&gt;</a>
<b>Role of the Facilitator</b>	<b>2</b> <a href="#">READ&gt;</a>
<b>Personal Qualities/Traits</b>	<b>3</b> <a href="#">READ&gt;</a>
<b>Appropriate Skills</b>	<b>4</b> <a href="#">READ&gt;</a>
<b>Appropriate Skills Cont...</b>	<b>5</b> <a href="#">READ&gt;</a>
<b>Beyond the obvious</b>	<b>6</b> <a href="#">READ&gt;</a>
<b>Top Tips</b>	<b>7</b> <a href="#">READ&gt;</a>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>8</b> <a href="#">READ&gt;</a>
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>9</b> <a href="#">READ&gt;</a>

# 1 INTRODUCTION

*'Facilitation is the art, not of putting ideas into people's head, but of drawing ideas out.'*

Facilitation is a term that means different things to different people. The dictionary definition is 'to make easy' and that in essence is what facilitation is about. It involves a neutral person helping and supporting a group achieve its aims and stated purpose through the use of a range of techniques, tools and behaviours.

## **Why use Facilitation?**

If you are grappling with an issue upon which there are a range of opinions, views and emotions, navigating your way through the discussion and debate process can be extremely challenging. Facilitation is increasingly used to manage the process with the belief that effective facilitation leads to:

- Better, smarter and faster outcomes
- 'Buy in' and ownership of the decisions/outcomes
- Meaningful discussion and debate
- Those taking part feeling their views have been heard in a considered way.

Facilitation is particularly useful when issues are complex and involve emotions. The techniques and tools used in a facilitated event may require aspects of consensus building or conflict resolution and the choice of facilitator is crucial if the group is to achieve its outcomes.



**The sources used in the development of this guide are available from  
The Consultation Institute.**

## 2 ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

*The Facilitator is the 'guardian of the process' being facilitated.*

The process is 'how' the group goes about accomplishing its task. The Facilitator is many things:

- The person who designs or advises on the design of the consultation process and the various dialogue methods being used
- An advisor to bring out the full potential of those involved
- A provider of processes, tools and techniques that can help the group accomplish their objectives
- A person who keeps the process on track
- Someone who helps resolve conflict and builds consensus, if that is a desired outcome
- Someone who provides structure to the work of the group
- Someone who protects the integrity of the process and exercises
- Someone who manages both discussion and behaviours.

It is not the role of the facilitator to offer opinion or influence the content or outputs of the process or exercise. The facilitator pays attention to the way the process or group works ensuring all participants are able to contribute.

Within a facilitation for consultation context, a facilitator will also ensure that there is evidence of a commitment to meaningful feedback to those involved and transparency in how the information will be used.

***'A good facilitator is like a conductor. If everyone plays all the time, there is nothing but an unpleasant noise. It's the conductor's job to help each player to listen to others, to keep quiet until it is the right time for them to play.'***

# 3 PERSONAL QUALITIES/TRAITS

There are two key ingredients in the 'make- up' of a good facilitator:

*Personal qualities/traits*  
*Appropriate skills*

## **Personal Qualities/Traits**

A facilitator needs to be accepted by the group and have the ability to build rapport in order that the role and responsibilities of the facilitator are clear and understood.

Examples of qualities inherent in a good facilitator are:

- Patience
- Objectivity
- Sense of humour
- Sensitivity
- Confidence
- Enthusiasm
- Encouragement
- Intuitiveness
- Tolerance.

It must be acknowledged that not everyone has the personality to facilitate. If the facilitator becomes emotionally involved or influences the content of the process by, for example, expressing their own opinion, passing judgement on responses or, manipulating actions through their own feedback, the process or exercise has been compromised.

## **Ask yourself..?**

- Are you willing to listen to others without judgement or preconceived notions about what the outcomes should be?
- Do you show respect for the opinions of others even if they disagree with you?
- Can you release the need to have complete control of a conversation or other situations?
- Are you comfortable dealing with conflict?
- Are you comfortable speaking in public?
- Are you able to laugh at yourself?
- Can you think on your feet?
- Do you believe that groups working together are smarter than individuals working alone?
- Can you accept feedback from others about yourself?

## 4 APPROPRIATE SKILLS

*The facilitator requires to possess a range of skills in order to act as 'guardian of the process' to be facilitated.*

### Managing the 'Process'

**Planning and organisation** – to ensure the design and delivery of the process is appropriate. This can include ensuring clarity of purpose, the physical environment, the timing of the event, communication with participants, recording, analysis of data and reporting of outputs.

**Managing with flexibility** – The process or exercise can be unpredictable and it is important the facilitator has the ability to think and act creatively using a wide range of tools and techniques to respond to changes in dynamics and direction of the group.

### Managing the 'Behaviours'

Effective facilitators have the ability to **recognise the behavioural traits** within a group and have the required skills to deal with a mix of behaviours as they manifest themselves. This can range from the domineering to the shy and reserved.

This leads to the importance of **'Ground Rules'** developed and agreed by the group at the start of the process. These give confidence to both the facilitator and the group about expectations with sanctions available should the progress of the group be put at risk.

**Body language** can also be used by the facilitator to address behaviours. The facilitator must also be aware of their own body language as not giving signs of bias or influence.

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# 5 APPROPRIATE SKILLS cont...

*And there's more...*

## Managing the 'Discussion'

**Encouraging the discussion** – The facilitator has a responsibility to ensure everyone has the opportunity to contribute.

**Dealing with sensitivities** – The facilitator will be skilled in recognising when sensitive issues are making participants feel uncomfortable or there is a danger that the process will be negatively affected. The facilitator will use appropriate techniques to ensure that participants are not embarrassed or their contribution is compromised.

**Maintaining direction and progress** – It is critical that direction and focus on the task is maintained and progress towards achieving the aims of the process or exercise is monitored throughout the exercise.

**Reflection and summary** – The facilitator requires to possess the ability to capture the key points in the words of the group and accurately summarise the discussion.

**Use of appropriate tools and techniques** – Depending on the discussion and dynamics of the process or exercise, the facilitator may have to draw on a range of techniques in order that the 'process is protected'.

This can include an understanding of body language both in determining the 'pulse' of the exercise and in supporting and encouraging progress.





## 6 BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

*Facilitators can benefit from an understanding of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) models and techniques.*

Research suggests only 7% of how we communicate relates to the actual words we use. Some 38% relates to how we use words in terms of tone, expression, volume etc with 55% determined by non-verbal body language such as posture, skin tone etc.

An NLP informed facilitator can use choice of words, tone, volume and expression to encourage participation and deal with a range of situations.

The ability to interpret body language can be a significant tool from two perspectives. Firstly, in gaining an insight into the participant's attitude, frame of mind and the progress of the exercise thus enabling the facilitator to become aware of techniques required for success. Secondly, the use of eye contact, hand gestures, body positioning by the facilitator can build rapport and address behavioural issues displayed by participants towards positive outcomes.

It is crucial that the facilitator is aware of his/her own use of language and body language in order not to compromise their role as facilitator.

How we **perceive** people, and situations can directly affect how we **project** ourselves and this will dictate the **response** we get from others. The facilitator must be aware of his/ her own perceptions and how these may be consciously or unconsciously displayed.

*' Perception is projection is response '*



# 7 TOP TIPS

## Ten *Do's* for Facilitators

1. A facilitator must always remain neutral, objective and fair
2. Re- read 1!
3. Keep everything visible
4. Involve participants whenever you can
5. Don't be afraid to cut someone off who is going on and on – but be tactful
6. Be organised and well prepared – get your equipment and materials
7. The group needs to speak to each other not to you
8. Know when to be quiet
9. Carry out 'pulse checks' during the process to ensure you will achieve the outcome
10. Preserve the integrity of the group, every individual and yourself.

## Ten *Don'ts* for Facilitators

1. Admonish a participant in a group
2. Insult the organisation or..
3. ..any member of the group!
4. Change the wording of participants
5. Fix a problem for the group
6. Judge comments
7. Manipulate people through their feedback
8. Monopolise the discussion
9. Take sides on issues or participants
10. Try and provide all the answers

## 8 CONCLUSION

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*Facilitating a process or exercise can be challenging, exhausting both mentally and physically and extremely rewarding.*

It requires personal qualities and a range of skills and expertise in order that you can build rapport with the group and effectively manage and deliver the process.

Not everyone can facilitate and even those who can need to consider if their background knowledge and experience is appropriate for the particular situation to be facilitated. Yes there are generic facilitation skills which are appropriate in most situations but a facilitator must consider if they will be accepted by the group. This will be dependent on the perception of the group as to whether the facilitator has, for example, any previous relationship with the client or a potential bias. The facilitator must be acknowledged as there to be **'guardian of the process'**.

In certain circumstances, the facilitator may require a specialist knowledge and understanding of the issue or the language or vocabulary pertaining to the issue. It must, however, be transparent that this will not compromise the neutrality of the facilitator.

Within a 'facilitation for consultation' context, the responsibility of the facilitator is wider than that performed in, for example, a market research context. The level of transparency expected from the process or exercise, and the commitment towards meaningful feedback to all who have participated is considered paramount. This ensures the facilitation has enabled a dynamic process of dialogue between individuals or groups, based upon a genuine exchange of views, with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action.

## 9 GLOSSARY

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**Facilitation** – The act of ‘making easy’

**Outcomes** – the difference that results from a series of actions/discussions.

**Techniques and tools** – a range of methods, games used by the facilitator to progress the group towards meeting its stated aims and objectives.

**Consensus building** – helping a group come to a general agreement or accord.

**Conflict resolution** – helping a group through processes of negotiation and arbitration to promote the peaceful ending of a disagreement or conflict.

**Process** – within a consultation context, the complete development, design and delivery of a consultation.

**Exercise** – within a consultation context, a dialogue method such as a focus group or meeting.

**Rapport** – relationship marked by harmony, affinity.

**Behavioural traits** – visibly define how you think, what you believe, how you react and how you see the world around you.

**Ground Rules** – the basic rules on which future actions or behaviours should be based and the sanctions should they be compromised.

**Body language** – non-verbal communication making up 55% of the way we communicate.

**Pulse checks** – regular reflection by a facilitator as to how a group is progressing in terms of both task and dynamics.

**Neuro Linguistic Programming** – The study of neurological processes, language and behaviour patterns that can be learned through experience (programmes) to achieve specific goals in life .

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