COMMUNITY ALPHABET

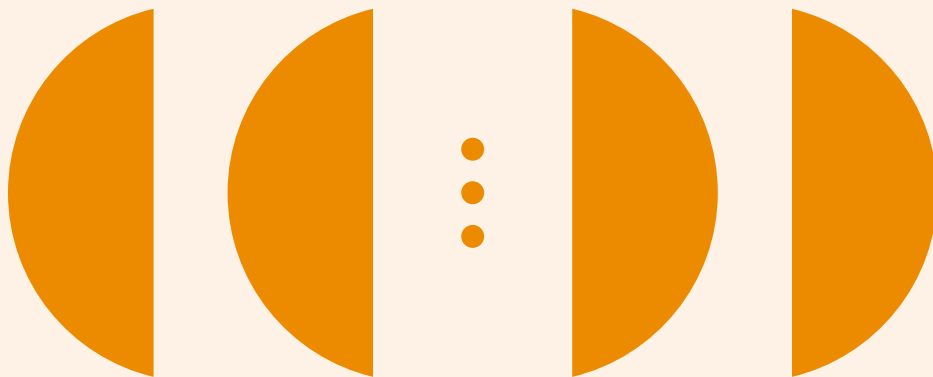# FACILITATION IN COMMUNITY BUILDING

WHAT IS FACILITATION?

Facilitation means "**making easy**", and is the art of helping a group to reach a shared goal, such as getting to know each other better, making shared decisions, planning a process, designing a product or learning from each other.

Facilitators use different **techniques and methods** to help groups listen to each other, discuss topics, generate ideas, sort and prioritise and make decisions, to mention just a few.

The word "facilitation" is used in everything from **design** to dialogue between groups in **conflict**. It's a form of **leadership** where the facilitator takes responsibility for the process, listens carefully, helps the group to summarise different views or agreements, but lets the group come to its own conclusions and decisions.

This last part may well be the **hardest thing** of facilitation - to be in a leadership position but not interfere with the outcomes by expressing your own opinions or favouring one result over another.

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Think of times when you've been in facilitated meetings. What makes a good facilitator, from your perspective?

FACILITATION
IN COMMUNITY BUILDING

A lot of a community builder's work is about **groups**. The teams we work in, the groups we are a part of and engage with, the community as a whole. Sooner or later, most community builders end up chairing a **meeting**, facilitating a **workshop** or hosting a **gathering**.

Skills in facilitation can help community builders encourage **strong relationships, equal participation and democratic decision making** in the groups they are a part of or lead. This in turn makes processes more **fair, inclusive, and sustainable** - when people feel belonging and ownership of a process, they're more likely to stick to it, invest in it and see it through.

As a participant in a CA workshop noted, *Facilitation is about making space, giving a direction to find the way to cooperation.*

AN INTRODUCTION TO GROUP DYNAMICS

Group dynamics are what happens in a group and between its members. They are influenced both by what happens **within** each member of the group - their thoughts and feelings - and what goes on **between** the members.

It's helpful for facilitators to know a little bit about the group before a gathering, such as how well the members know each other and if there are controversial issues between them. But it's just as important to use your open mind and active listening skills in the moment!

Researcher Susan Wheelan defines a group as individuals who have come together to work towards a shared goal. She has developed a **model that describes different phases that groups go through** in their development.

- **Dependency and inclusion:** Where members in the group are preoccupied with fitting in and being accepted, and often depend on leadership figures for guidance on how to be and act in the group.

- **Counter-dependency and fighting:** Where people start feeling safe enough to express their opinions more freely and start positioning themselves in the group, which may lead to situations of competition, tension and conflict and to challenging the leadership.

AN INTRODUCTION TO GROUP DYNAMICS

- **Trust and structure:** Where the conflicts and role-seeking has been resolved, and the team has structures in place to help them work productively together. They need less guidance from a leader or facilitator, and can solve a lot of tasks by themselves.

- **Work and productivity:** Where the group is secure enough to focus less on inclusion, roles and structure, and more on the task at hand. This group is more effective, innovative and flexible than the others, supported by strong relationships and a strong commitment to the shared goal.[1]

Not all groups move through all of the stages, and changes in group membership, responsibilities, structure and others can throw groups back to an earlier stage.

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Think of a group you've been a part of for a longer period, for example at work or a local association. Do you recognize the stages? How did it feel to you to be in the different ones?

[1] Wheelan, Susan et.al. *Creating Effective Teams: A Guide for Members and Leaders* (SAGE Publications, Inc., 2021).

GROUP DYNAMICS FOR FACILITATORS

In community building, you will often be working with **new groups** that don't know each other so well yet. That means that the facilitator plays an important role to make sure that people feel **included, safe to express** themselves, and that different **opinions are heard and valued** by the group. Allowing time to **get to know each other** is also important.

As the group moves forward, or if you're working with a group of people who know each other a bit better, you can count on some **tension and conflict** arising. It's a natural step when people feel more **safe and ready to express different perspectives**. As a facilitator, the tools from the Tension and conflict thematic bloc can help you encourage and support the group through this phase.

The more a group develops, the more it can focus on the actual task at hand, as **relationships grow stronge**r and **people learn to resolve tension and conflict constructively**. They need less guidance and structure from a facilitator, and can solve conflicts and build structures on their own.

BUILDING THE RIGHT SPACE

When you facilitate a gathering, you build, together with the participants, an **alternative space**.

You try to influence the group dynamics in a way that creates **openness and trust,** and that allows the group to **connect** with each other, **discuss** openly and **solve problems** together.

The goal is a space where people **feel safe** to express themselves, **heard** and listened to, and **respected** for who they are as people, but also ready to **challenge** themselves and each other, see **new perspectives** and grapple with **tension** and difficult questions.

Creating this space is maybe the most important of all aspects of facilitation, since it makes all the other things – participation, innovation, dialogue, difficult conversations, etc. – possible!

In the next few sections, we'll look further into **four aspects of building good spaces:**

- Setting up space
- Building trust
- Levelling power and voice
- Holding space for tension

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Have you been in meetings and gatherings that felt like an alternative space, different from the outside world? How did the facilitators make that happen?

SETTING UP SPACE

Creating the right space starts **before** you even start your workshop.

Different **planning choices** - such as

- time and place

- design and distribution of invitations

- participants in panels and leadership positions

- accessibility of the venue

will affect how different people feel welcome, spoken to, and invited to the event, and once they get there, how they are able to participate fully and equally. More support on this can be found in the [Identity and diversity](#) and [Power dynamics and bias thematic blocs](#).

Creating a **welcoming atmosphere** can be as simple as greeting every participant at the door or offering coffee. Decorations, set up of tables and chairs and what information you present on the walls can also influence first impressions.

Welcome

SETTING UP SPACE

Make sure **everyone gets to speak** as early as possible. This will help people feel connected and seen, and encourage participation further on.

In a small group, a **check in question**[2] that everyone gets to answer in turn can be useful. In a larger group, it may be better to let people check in in smaller groups.

It may also be helpful to establish some basic **group agreements**[3] on how to act in the group. Best is to do this in a participatory way, but if time is short you can also present a draft to the group and ask them if they agree.

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Think of being a participant in a setting and with a group you've never been in before. What makes you feel comfortable, or uncomfortable, when you first arrive?

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[2] Daresay team, "Build Trust, Build Relationships." Retrieved 26 November, 2024.

[3] Seeds for Change, "Group Agreements for workshops and meetings." Retrieved 26 November, 2024.

BUILDING TRUST

Trust between participants, and of the participants towards the facilitator, is crucial to build good spaces.

Trust is something that happens **gradually**: we trust people because they've shown us that they are trustworthy. It's easier for us to trust people who we think we have a lot in common with, while building trust over different identities, perspectives, values and experiences can be more challenging.

Researcher Anders Wendenhielm describes a **trust and openness spiral**.[4] The more trust, the more people are willing to open up about themselves, their thoughts and feelings. This makes other people in the group trust them more, and in turn feel safe to open up. The trust building happens in small steps, as people try out how open they can be in a group without facing judgement or other negative.

SOMEONE SHARES
OPENLY

OPENNESS

TRUST
GROWS

TRUST

OPENNESS

MORE PEOPLE
SHARE

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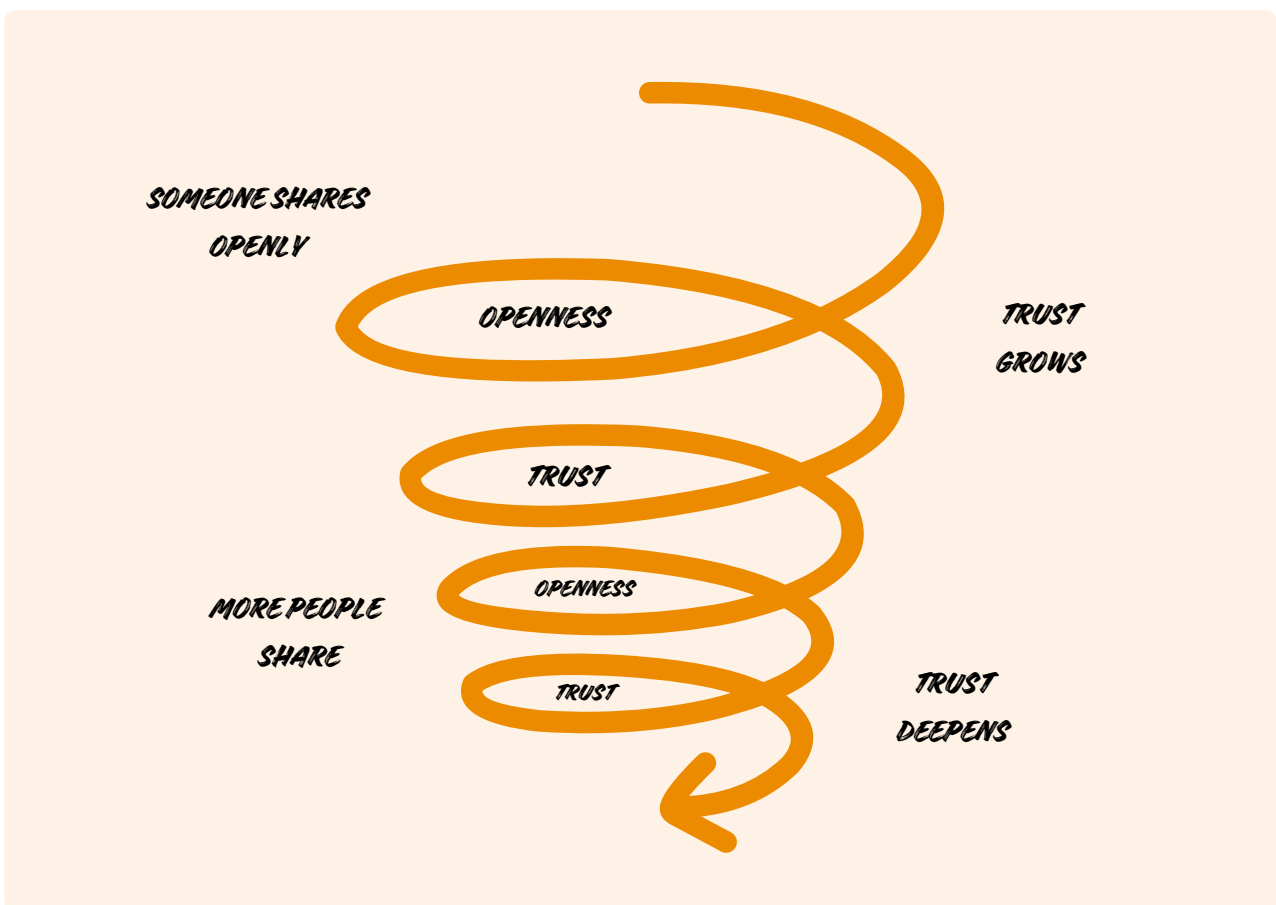
TRUST
DEEPENS

[4] Mischief Makers, "The Openness - Trust Spiral." Retrieved 26 November, 2024.

BUILDING TRUST

Facilitators can help participants start this spiral by setting up the space well and help participants build relationships early on. **Thoughtful check-in questions** and exercises that emphasise **shared humanity** and that nudge people to open up on a more personal level are helpful. Games, **laughter** and fun as well. As a facilitator, you also help build trust by levelling power and holding space for tension (see the next two sections).

As trust grows, it becomes possible to ask and talk about more sensitive or controversial topics. But **tread with care** - asking too much too soon can hinder rather than help! The trick is to start slow and then ease your way into the spiral.

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

What behaviours and qualities are important for you to trust someone? How can you develop those behaviours and qualities in yourself so that others may trust you more?

LEVELLING POWER AND VOICE

In all groups, it's easier for some people to make their voices and perspectives heard than others. It may be because of formal **power**, informal **hierarchies, personality, bias** or something else. Facilitators work to balance that power and make sure everyone has an equal opportunity to participate and contribute.

Shifting between **individual reflection, small group discussions** and **plenary sessions** helps more people participate and be heard. Taking many breaks and using different mediums and types of activities - such as **art, storytelling, music and games** - can also help cater to different people's needs.

Turn taking, rounds, talking sticks and giving people a preset number of entries in a discussion are examples of techniques that in a direct way divides time and space more fairly. Setting a group agreement around sharing space can also be helpful.

The facilitator has an important role to ask about, listen to, and lift different perspectives and voices. Be **attentive** to power hierarchies in the room, ask **direct questions** to those who are not being heard, **lift perspectives** that have been voiced but seem to have been forgotten or overlooked, **gently intervene** if one or a few participants start to dominate the conversations, and watch out for, and find kind ways to counter, any biassed or discriminatory behaviours.
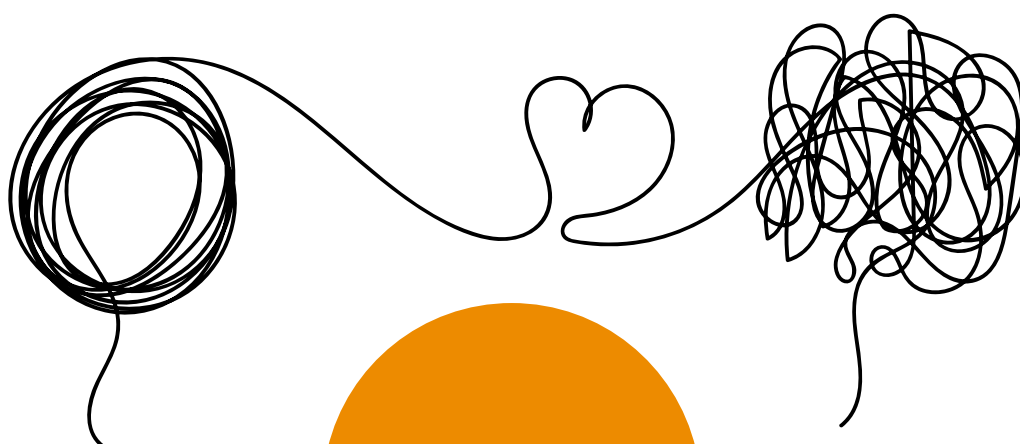
HOLDING SPACE FOR TENSION

As in the rest of life, conflicting views or tension in a facilitation setting is not necessarily bad. Disagreement is often a necessary step in getting to a decision, and can generate fresh ideas, a deeper understanding of other people's perspectives, and solutions that take into account the needs of everyone.

As a facilitator, your role is not to take sides or act as a referee, but rather to help different perspectives be heard and understood, and incorporated into the group decision making process. Use **active listening skills** to dig deeper into different opinions and why they are held, and role playing and other **perspective taking exercises** to help people think outside of their own box and bias.

A useful concept is **multipartiality**[5]. While impartiality or neutrality means not taking sides or getting involved, multipartiality instead means listening to, empathising with and supporting all different perspectives, helping people to express their interests and needs, and balancing power issues to make sure everyone is seen and heard.

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[5] For an in depth explanation of multipartiality see Vicki Assegued, "I'm Not Neutral about Neutrality - I'm Partial to Multi-Partiality.", 2018. Retrieved 20 October, 2024.

HOLDING SPACE FOR TENSION

Two things are important to remember when talking about tension in facilitation:

- Holding space for tension is not the same as allowing people to be unkind to each other. If this happens, the facilitator needs to find a way to **intervene**, to **protect** the space for everyone. There are useful tips online!

- Facilitators can help manage tension in a group around the topic at hand, but **facilitators are not mediators**. Personal conflicts or conflicts about unrelated topics are better handled elsewhere. You can read more about general conflict management in the [Tension and conflict thematic bloc](#).
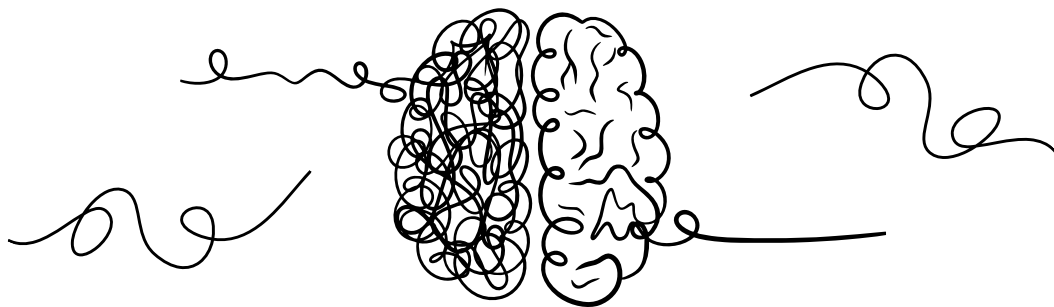
EXERCISE

*Put the **four aspects of building a good space into practice** at your next gathering using this [exercise.](#) You can use it on your own or in a group.*

DESIGNING THE AGENDA

When you design the agenda for a gathering, the most important question is **why**. The **purpose** of your gathering - whether to make certain decisions, to build trust in a new group, to learn more about a certain topic or something else, **will then guide who you invite, how you prepare and what you do**. Make sure everyone in the team is clear on the purpose before taking the next step in the planning process.

Here are some other useful tips:

- Have a clear plan for both the **opening** and the **closing** of your gathering. This will greatly influence how people show up during the gathering and how they remember it.

- Choose your activities based on the purpose, and **don't try to do too much**. When gatherings feel stressed we learn less, are at heightened risk of making rushed decisions or not completing our agenda, and have less time to build trust and relationships.

- The [design diamond],[6] or this inspired method from [Hyper Island],[7] can be adapted to many decision making meetings. Remember to think in advance about how to make decisions - for example by majority or by consensus - and what that process will look like.

[6] Design Council, "[Design Diamond]." Retrieved 26 November, 2024.

[7] Hyper Island, "[Idea and Concept Development]." Retrieved 26 November, 2024.

DESIGNING
THE AGENDA

- In trainings, alternating between **theory, reflection** and **practice**, as well as between **listening, watching** and **engaging** and even **sitting, standing and moving** are things that can help keep your workshop dynamic and memorable.

- If your workshop is a decision making one, make sure that you also have time to make an **action plan** with **clear responsibilities** on who does what moving forward, to ensure implementation.

Online databases like Session Lab (see the Resources section below) have hundreds of methods and tools that you can filter based on the purpose of the activity. Explore it and try something new at your next gathering.
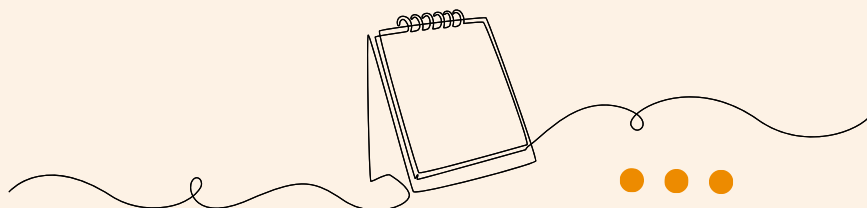
YOU AS A FACILITATOR

As a facilitator, your most important tool is **you**. The tools, methods and theories help, but how you show up is going to matter a lot in how they are received and play out. Here are some ideas on what makes a good facilitator. Do you have more?

- **Being self reflective:** Good facilitators are self aware, conscious of their own role, privilege and power in the room, and about how other people may react to their behaviours. They are open to feedback and reflect and learn from their experiences.

- **Setting a good example:** As a facilitator, you model the behaviours you want from the group. Active listening, respect for difference, trust in the process, patience, openness to new ideas - everything you want the group to do, you need to also show.

- **Reading the room:** While facilitating, you need to keep a watchful eye on the participants. What are the power dynamics like? How is the energy in the group? Are people active and engaged? Is the activity working out? Is it time for a break?

- **Being flexible:** If things are not working out, the facilitator is responsible to make a change. Sometimes you can do that on your own accord, and other times you may want to ask the group what they need for the space to work better for them.

- **Being prepared:** A prepared facilitator, who knows the content, the activities, and the purpose of the gathering well, will be more confident and steady and will also make the group feel more safe. It will also allow you to think on your feet and make adjustments if needed.

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

What are your biggest strengths as a facilitator? What would you like to get better at? How could you do that? If you want to dive deeper you can use the facilitator's self assessment and action plan.

RESOURCES

- Parker, Priya. *The art of gathering: how we meet and why it matters* (Riverhead Books, 2018).
  A treasure trove for anyone who hosts - regardless of the type of gathering. Practical as well as inspirational.

- Mischief Makers. [Facilipedia](#). Retrieved 27 October, 2024.
  A curated online library of tips and tricks for facilitators.

- [Session Lab](#) and [Liberating Structures](#) *are organisations with a focus on facilitation and with great online libraries of methods.*

- [Facilitating Meaningful Conversation in the Voluntary Sector](#) *- a collection of ideas and methodologies drawing on asset-based community development thinking and practice.*

- [Art of Hosting](#) *is a global facilitation community of practice, with a number of insightful perspectives and descriptions of methods on their website focusing on personal practice, dialogue, facilitation and the co-creation of innovation to address complex challenges.*

Return to the [Useful tools page](#).

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