

Quick guide to Effective Facilitation and Consensus Decision-making with a Training Workshop Plan

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My name is Roger Hallam and I am a PhD student at Kings College researching effective designs and mechanisms for progressive/radical political collective action. I am writing this “quick guide” for the activists at the LSE occupation after speaking to a few of you and getting the idea you are short of skills/confidence in this area. I spent around 15 years as a trainer in facilitation, consensus, (and generally how to get your shit together!) for campaigners, radical housing and workers co-ops and community groups. I spent a good few years as an activist in various affinity groups and have been to prison several times for nonviolent direct actions. This I must emphasis does not mean I know all there is to know about this area. By its very nature there are several ways to approach effective group decision-making but I hope the following points below will be of some help. An hour’s training and role playing (eg how to deal with the nightmare guy who won’t shut up scenario) is massively more effective than reading a sheet about it and so included is the structure for a training workshop. Training is the most undervalued and yet most effective way to become better activists. People have been doing this stuff for hundreds of years and there’s really no excuse for reinventing the wheel!

First I will give you a few introductory comments. Lets start with the biggest misconception about all this. Consensus is not about everyone agreeing – this never happens and should not be the aim anyway. It’s about everyone agreeing to go along with a decision everyone has been involved in shaping and contributing to. So people might have their doubts but they can see the process of arriving at the decision is genuinely participatory and so legitimate. And facilitation is not about telling people what to do – it is not “chairing” in that old style definition. It is enabling the group to come to creative collective solutions to issues they all want to participate in deliberating upon.

Without getting bogged down in various abstract debates it should also be understood that there is no such thing as a structureless group. In every group there is power just as there is in any human interaction. So if you do not consciously structure a group for participation it will not be “structureless” but fall back on the default structures and power relations of the society we live in – e.g. women will speak less than men etc. The real choice then is between accountable power or hidden power. The aim of consensus and facilitation is to structure the power relations to approximate values of equality and respect through the encouragement of participation. As an added bonus well facilitated groups come up with the best creative solutions – what is called collective intelligence. So as Gandhi famously said – we become the change we want to see.

None of what below is written in stone – most of these points make sense most of the time but not in every context. Also it is not an exhaustive list – no doubt there are other additional valid points other trainers could make. However if you do a bit of role playing and practice with a mentor for two or three times you will very quickly get to 80% of all there is to master about this. Getting to 99% will take you another twenty years though!

First I will give up a quick check list – you might think these are not important but small details make all the difference in groups and what’s more they are really easy to learn and put into action.

1. Start on time or at least within 5 minutes of the start. – going round telling people in different parts of the room is more effective than shouting at everyone that the meeting is about to start.
2. Make sure the space is quiet – doors are shut
3. Speak clearly and slowly – it is essential everyone can hear you.
4. Make sure everyone is in a circle – unless it is a very large group make sure no one is left out of the circle – be pro active about this – people are often shy and they will not participate unless physically brought into the group.
5. Introduction yourself briefly welcome everyone and state the purpose of the meeting – what we are all here to achieve. Feel free to be human – “I haven’t done much facilitation so hopefully you can bear with me” – people warm to fallibility! Make sure someone is taking minutes and has every ones names and emails etc as appropriate.
6. If it’s a large group – or if it’s a tricky meeting (possibly lots of emotion), have a second facilitator and swop over – whoever is not active time keeps and prompts (e.g. on people who want to speak)
7. Know what the ground rules are and communicate them clearly. E.g. the basic values of the group: to encourage the participation of everyone and come to decisions together which we can all go along with: so one person speak at a time – hand up to speak – no violent or aggressive language – bias towards women/minorities in the stack of people to speak – ways to communicate (agree, disagree, block, clap etc), time out if gets heated etc (as appropriate).
8. State the finishing time and the structure/agenda of the meeting (get agreement on it is if not already agreed). And if and when the group will split up (always a good idea if more than 10 people) and then get back together and feed back into the group (there are lots of designs/options here depending numbers/aims/time available).
9. Remind the group regularly during the meeting of the time constraints and of the agenda
10. Unless everyone knows each other well, have an initial go round. Everyone at a minimum says who they are and why they are here (you can add various other things but be careful – it’s not therapy!). The point of this is not the information so much as the psychological phenomenon that a structure which requires everyone to speak means that the barriers to speaking again are much lessened (the subconscious thought is – I have spoken once so I am allowed to speak again)

In terms of group dynamics if you get to do all this and it is clearly communicated and heard you are 80% there in terms of having a successful meeting.

So what to do. All this requires a bit of skill and quite a bit of confidence. Like riding a bike once you are in the meeting you are in the thick of it and can’t stop without falling off! This is why it’s nice to have a co-facilitator/buddy (so you can whisper to them – “what the fuck do I do now!”)

So the basic gist is that there are decisions to be made, difference views on the best decision, and a limited time in which to make them. Your aim is the get to what the group thinks (ie not you!) is the best/most creative decision. *You are never there to say what you think is best.* You need to be strictly neutral. In small groups on smaller issues then the conversation can be allowed to flow.

Here are the three main sets of skills:

Encourage participation:

Ask people directly for their thoughts if they have not spoken yet. You could say “So Mary could you say what your thoughts are” (people always have them). Remember to use their name. If they say they are not sure then feedback that to them and this encourages them to say more (people speak to the extent that they feel heard)

“I don’t really have a view on this”

“So there nothing you want to say about this”

“ Yeah that’s right – I mean- I basically think the idea is pretty crap!”

“Okay so you really don’t want this thing to go ahead”

“No I don’t to be honest – I don’t think we haven’t really thought about the practicalities..”

(and she’s off ... and your job is done!)

Difficult people

This usually means people talking too much. This is.. well.. difficult and you have to work out why they are being “difficult”. More often than not people are just being unaware. So this is what you do. Gently interrupt using their name; value their contribution; summarise their point (in one point); remind them of the values of the group – to encourage participation; and ask if others would like to respond to the persons points. So like:

“Jack thanks for those points they sound really important/interesting; what you seem to be saying then is that it is really important get information to all the colleges about the date of the demo. I am sure other people have views on this subject so I would to ask what the others think about ideas Jack has raised” (note: ideas do not belong to people they come through them – profound but true!)

Similarly you can use the same structure for all other tricky interventions e.g. when people are going off point or repeating issues which have been agreed.

“So Mary what you’re saying sounds really good; that we need to definitely have this demo. My understanding is we have agreed and it’s been minuted. What people want to sort out now is the date and time.” (note say what the group wants it not want you think should be happening! – what you want must never be the issue).

Getting consensus and moving on:

Summarise the discussion as it goes along – summarise the points of agreement and then the points of disagreement – “so it seems we all agree we do want to go ahead with the demo and we have various options about the date and time” – this stops people going back over stuff they have already agreed. Note say “and” not “but”..- be positive!

Getting consensus – sometimes this is easy – often though this is the most tricky bit and the truth is it is always messy. The idea is to “test for consensus” like this: “so it seems that we possibly have agreement to do x but with y and z included” – note creative solutions that take account of several concerns which will be fairly complex and involve several elements. If there seems consensus explicitly check for it and get it minuted. If there is not yet consensus summarise again what the group has agreed (so they feel they are getting there) and what is not yet agreed and then hand discussion back to the group. The vast majority of the time this does the trick – more often than people think. Occasionally if things are still tricky there are a number of options.

You can explicitly ask if someone actually wants to block what seems like the majority view. (Note people need to be aware that blocking means they have a fundamental disagreement with the proposal e.g. their continued participation/membership of the group would be in question if the decision went ahead). If not then you have your decision. If there are still problems with the decision then you can:

- Suggest the decision is delayed till the next meeting (let people cool off, sleep on it, talk informally to get to a more creative solution)
- Ask the group what they want to do – carry on or carry it over?
- Engage in more complex structured consensus building techniques such as a group brainstorming processes to find more creative options which everyone can live with etc (this is another area which requires training).

In fact blocking in practice is very rare, particularly in well organised groups. Decisions more often get bogged down because you are 90% there but people start getting over involved in the details. Delegation is essence of good organisation. So suggest something like – “so it seems like we have agreed to have the open meal and Jane and John have a lot of ideas about where to get the food from so I suggest we delegate them to meet outside the meeting and get that sorted – if that’s okay we can move on as we have 4 more items to discuss before the finishing time of the meeting” (always a good idea to remind people of other items to discuss).

Get the idea. Calm, respectful, firm. There’s lots more nuance of course and as I say practice makes perfect. Get some training on it – it’s a totally worthwhile investment. See the plan below.

If you want help with facilitating and or training or just want to get in touch me the Radical Think (and do) Tank. Email: organics2go@googlemail.com. Thanks.

Workshop plan to go with the above text:

The way to change the world is not to show people how to do things but to show people how to show other people how to do things.

With this in mind once you have done facilitation a few times you are certainly in a position to “train” other people in the techniques. This is because there is only a limited amount of technical

information to be give out. People, including yourself, will benefit most by practicing. And the best way to practice is to role play in small groups. It's also a good laugh!

Here then is a basic outline of a training workshop you can run. Obviously it can be adapted to circumstances – such as how many people you are training. Ideally though a group of 6-12 people is best – not too many as everyone needs to have a chance to role play the facilitator in numerous situations.

So here is the plan.

1. First start with introducing yourself and the purpose of the workshop. And a brief introduction to why facilitation is a good idea – enables participation – getting things done faster etc.

2. Have a go round – could do a normal one and/or split people into pairs and people say something about themselves and then the other person summarises it and then change roles. This then introduces a key skill – the ability to listen and summarise what people are saying without judgement.

Explain the structure of the workshop will be to explain a key skill and then role play as this is the best way of learning and most of the skill of facilitation is in having the confidence in using the skills. So practice is best.

3. Go through the basics of a good meeting (see the list above) – start on time – check the agenda – finish on time etc. – explain these are easy basics anyone can get right. Make a checklist and make sure you go through them all at the beginning of the meeting.

4. Summarise the values and ground rules of the meeting. Split into groups of 4 and come up with 4 ground rules/values for a meeting. Bring back together after 5 minutes and write them on a sheet of paper. Then decide on 3 most important ones. Then one person role plays introducing the meeting - going through the basic checklist and then goes through the ground rules. Get any feedback from the group.

(note the people should be sitting in a circle and start on the left of you and get people to role play one after another round the circle so everyone gets to role play in turn. Don't ask for volunteers as this just leads to the self selection of the most confident people).

Get people to do this in twos – one person role plays the facilitator and goes through the groundrules and the other listens, and then swop round. Then give each other feedback.

Back into the main group and check for any questions.

5. Encourage participation

Explain how to get someone to speak and contribution - ask what they think using their name. Then if they said they have nothing to say summarise that would have nothing to say and thus draw them into the group by actively listening to them and encouraging them to “speak their truth”. See dialogue above.

Get two people to role play a lively exchange on how to organise a demo and a third person to be silent because they don't think the demo is a good idea at all. You ask the third person to speak and enable them to be drawn into the group.

Split into groups four and get each group to do this role play. Or do it in the large group. You can have fun by having someone being super quiet!

6. Dealing with difficult people

The situation here is to explain that most people are not difficult but just get carried away with themselves. Go through the routine – interrupt – use their name – summarise their point in a sentence and validate it – say other people would like to comment on this important information/view and then ask others to contribute. Remind person of participatory values of the groups if needed. See above for a script.

Do a role play: one person is saying how the demo is a great idea with great enthusiasm and then you intervene and ask the other to contribute. You can have fun with the talking person getting more difficult so 2-3 interventions are needed. But remind people usually one intervention is sufficient, particularly if you have made the ground rules clear at the beginning of the meeting.

Split into groups and role play in those groups.

7. Consensus building

First role play the basic summarising of discussion. Summarise the agreement and the remaining disagreement. Emphasise this needs to be done regularly and assertively for meetings to be efficient – i.e. to get through the agenda.

Having three people in animated discussion about organising the demo. Have them agree the date and time and then carry on discussing it – you intervene make explicit what is agreed and get them to move on.

People role play this in small groups.

Next look at the test for consensus.

Role play doing this first. Make proposal and ask if we are all agreed on it and then ask for it to be minuted. Then roleplay with objections and go through the following:

Respond by summarising the objection and then give it back to the group

Respond by suggesting that the key decision has been made and 2-3 people can sort out the remaining details outside the meeting – test for agreement on this – if agreed get it minuted.

Respond by suggesting that are just 2-3 people that have strong views on it and so they could get together outside the meeting to come up with creative solutions and/or we discuss it again at the next meeting given the time restraints. Minute what has been agreed and what remains to be agreed.

Split into groups and role play these various interventions. You could use the example of having decided on the purpose of the open meeting but getting bogged down on what food to bring along.

8. Summarise again main skills again.

These then are the main skills to role play. People can be encouraged to meet more and do more role play practice in twos or threes. As a final exercise – get people back into pairs and tell each other what they have learnt and what persona challenges they think remain – each person can summarise what the other says. Get back together and thank everyone for their participation and wish them the best of luck.

This workshop plan could be adapted to give people a taster of the skills or could be expanded to take several hours so as to ensure that each participant gets to role play the facilitator for each skill. It is a good idea that this training is part of a wider training programme. A good process would be as follows. A trainee facilitator sits next to a trained one and watches them in a meeting. They then have a chat together about the meeting at the end, discussing how the facilitator dealt with tricky moments and issues. Then at the next meeting the roles are reversed and the new person facilitates and again they have a debriefing session at the end. After maybe one more session like this they are ready to do it on their own – and then become a trainer themselves. The more people who can facilitate in a group the more participatory it can be and the more balanced a group and organisation can be in terms of gender, ethnic, sexual orientation etc. A policy of equal participation then needs this sort of training process to work properly.