

Discussion Facilitation Techniques

-  Use wait-time. When asking a question, give staff members 5–10 seconds to think before asking someone to respond. Wait patiently without rephrasing your question.
-  Use cooperative structures. Use structures such as “Turn to Your Partner” and “Think, Pair, Share” to get everyone involved in the discussion. Cooperative structures are especially powerful when only a few voices are being heard in a discussion or when many people want to talk at once. (See “CSC Cooperative Structures,” page 5.)
-  Use open-ended questions and probes. Encourage discussion, clarify understanding, and promote reflection by using open-ended questions that encourage multiple responses (not just yes or no answers). Facilitating discussions in this way requires that you actively listen and make minute-by-minute decisions about which comments to probe and which not to probe. Keep the purpose of the discussion clearly in mind and choose to probe those comments that will lead to further learning by all. Some examples of probes include:
 - Q** *Do you agree or disagree with [Jeremy’s] idea? Why?*
 - Q** *What would you like to add to what [Ann] said?*
 - Q** *What questions would you like to ask [Emilio]?*
 - Q** *Why do you think so?*
 - Q** *Please say more about that.*
 - Q** *What is an example of that?*
-  Respond neutrally but with interest. Acknowledge staff members’ contributions while refraining from evaluative comments. A positive comment such as “Great answer” can sometimes inhibit discussion as much as a negative one because it can discourage others from offering different ideas. Responses such as a nod, “Thank you,” and “What do others think about what [Pamela] said?” can encourage participants to think for themselves and take responsibility for contributing to the discussion.
-  Communicate explicit expectations for participation and behavior. Be clear that you expect participation by everyone and that engaging in other activities during the discussion, such as grading papers, is not appropriate. Before a discussion, review staff norms. If you notice the staff falling short of the norms, stop to discuss the differences between how they are treating one another and the norms they’ve set.

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Discussion Facilitation Techniques (Continued)

-  **Call attention to different points of view.** Highlight differences of opinion by pointing out, without judgment, what the differences are. First in pairs and then as a whole group, ask the staff to discuss which opinion they agree with and why. You can also ask staff members to paraphrase another’s point of view before stating their own.
-  **Identify how a decision will be made.** Before a decision-making discussion, make it clear whether the staff will make the decision or whether you or a designated group will make the decision after obtaining staff input.
-  **Reach decisions through consensus.** When you ask the staff to make a decision, work toward consensus. Building consensus means making a decision that is acceptable to all, even if it is not everyone’s first choice. In situations where staff members express a difference of opinion about a decision, ask people to identify what they can’t live with and how to modify a decision so that they can live with it. Unlike voting, consensus building helps everyone buy into the decision and avoids “winners and losers.”
-  **Manage the time.** While discussions are an important part of the learning process, they can present a time-management challenge. Keep discussions moving and focused on the topic. Respond to comments that are off the topic (or those that might be better responded to one-on-one) by offering to keep a chart of topics to be discussed at a future meeting or by saying something like, “I’d like to discuss this idea further. Could we talk after the meeting?” To help you wrap up a discussion or deal with situations in which you are running out of time, consider the following strategies:
 - State that you’ll take just one more comment before moving on.
 - Suggest another time, such as during a staff meeting, to continue the discussion.
 - Record “for next time” any questions or topics you can’t address during this discussion.
 - Continue the discussion and spend less time than allotted on another activity.
 - Negotiate with participants to stay a bit longer.