The Facilitation Primer

Strategies, Tools & Considerations to Get You Started

The Effective Health Care Program
Revised January 2012

This guide was created by the Scientific Resource Center at the Oregon Evidence-based Practice Center and adapted by AHRQ's Community Forum (http://www.effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov/index.cfm/who-is-involved-in-the-effective-health-care-program1/ahrq-community-forum/), a project to increase the involvement of stakeholders in the Effective Health Care Program.

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Introduction

This primer is intended as a basic introduction for those who are called upon to facilitate stakeholder related meetings as part of AHRQ's Effective Health Care (EHC) Program, and who are not professional facilitators or collaboration practitioners.

EHC Program stakeholder related meetings often involve sharing information among a diverse array of decision-makers, who are not used to working with one another, and who may be "meeting" each other for the first time. As such, participants are not members of a cohesive group, nor are they accountable to each other as members of other groups may be (boards of directors, work teams, etc.).

One assumption underlying the involvement of diverse stakeholders is that consideration of multiple stakeholder perspectives will result in research products that are more accurate and applicable in addressing decision-maker needs. A common misconception, however, is that by getting all the important experts or voices together, good results will occur easily and quickly. In reality, getting people together is only the beginning.

No primer can address all potential scenarios. However, this guide presents basic meeting and group facilitation tools intended as a foundation for skills, techniques and competencies.

Why Do Meetings Need Facilitators?

Sharing information among diverse decision-makers, or stakeholders, with the objective of more usable end-products, does not necessarily come easily or naturally. Stakeholders are interested in different outcomes, come from different cultures, and often use different language to express similar thoughts. To assure that objectives are met, meetings may need to be facilitated.

A well-facilitated meeting is generally made more effective and efficient by orienting all participants, ensuring they understand the meeting objective(s), and keeping the agenda focused on topics under discussion. Well-facilitated meetings also involve processes, tools and methods to help people interact productively with one another and make sure that all participants are heard.

Well-facilitated meetings have been found to:

- Increase exchange of ideas and knowledge shared
- Result in higher quality outcomes because all participants had an equal opportunity to participate
- Weave together varying viewpoints into a common framework
- Increase shared understanding and agreement among participants

What is a Facilitator?

A facilitator is "someone who uses knowledge of group processes to formulate and deliver the needed structure for meeting interactions to be effective" (American Society for Quality, 2002).

The role of a facilitator is to focus on effective processes and structures so that meeting participants are allowed to focus on the content or substance of the meeting. Facilitators must have enough "working knowledge" of the subject matter to recognize when additional structure is needed, but should not impose their views of the subject matter onto participants or into the meeting. Facilitators must continually balance meeting process with content, but their primary goal is to protect the process.

Attributes of an effective facilitator include:

- Openness
- Honesty & fairness
- Consistency in action and follow through
- Focus
- Use of active listening
- Accessibility
- Flexibility
- Assertiveness
- Enthusiasm
- Sense of humor

Effective processes and structures employed by facilitators include, but are not limited to, planning the meeting, documentation, and attention to meeting dynamics and follow up. An effective facilitator spends time in thoughtful preparation for all of these processes.

Preparing for the Meeting: The 5 Ps

An effective facilitator spends time in preparation for the meeting, with specific attention to meeting materials, orienting participants, meeting dynamics, follow up needs and documentation. Preparation includes identifying, in advance, the methods and tools that will be used, or materials that need to be provided to participants. The following questions should be considered when preparing for a meeting:

Purpose

- ✓ What is the reason for holding the meeting?
- ✓ What is the goal of the meeting?
- ✓ Is the meeting part of a larger goal?
- ✓ Are the goals (meeting and larger goals) documented or written down?
- ✓ How will participants be oriented to these goals?

Participants

- ✓ Who are the participants?
- ✓ How will participants be oriented prior to the meeting?
- ✓ Do any participants have special needs that require accommodation?
- ✓ What is the size of the group, and how will size affect process design?
- ✓ How will participants be introduced to one another?
- ✓ What is the role of the meeting participants (e.g. share information, generate solutions/answers, develop a recommendation, make a decision, etc.)?
- ✓ Who cannot attend, and how will their voice be included?
- ✓ Consider maximizing patient and consumer participation by:
    - Including more than one patient or consumer on calls
    - Holding one-on-one calls
    - Holding patient and consumer-only calls
    - Addressing other support needs that patient(s) and consumer(s) may have (e.g. preparation materials, having an advocate or family/friend with them on the phone, a personal call in advance of the meeting to see if they have any questions and to clarify the process, etc.)

Process and Possible Dynamics

- ✓ If more than one meeting is to be held, how will they be sequenced?
- ✓ What is the history of the meeting participants?
- ✓ Are there known alliances or conflicts among participants (or the organizations they represent)?
- ✓ Do one or more members have a preferred, pre-determined outcome?
- ✓ What are the potential problems with the meeting? How can they be addressed in advance?
- ✓ Will ground rules or other rules of engagement be established? How? And, how will they be communicated?

- ✓ How will participants be invited or expected to participate? For example, will they be called upon (and in what order)? Will all participants respond to specific or general questions? What techniques will be used to ensure all voices are heard?
- ✓ Which meeting facilitation tools (see next section) will be used? How will these be prepared and communicated to participants?

Planning for Logistics

- ✓ Is the meeting scheduled at a time convenient to all participants? (For example, participants may have full-time jobs or family responsibilities that limit participation. What flexible options can accommodate busy schedules?)
- ✓ Will there be more than one meeting?
- ✓ Do any participants require special accommodations? How will they be made available should they be necessary?
- ✓ How long is needed to accomplish the meeting purpose?
- ✓ How, when and where will the meeting be held? (e.g. in person, conference call, webex, other, etc)
- ✓ How will participants be informed of meeting location, date, time, etc.? Who will send the information to participants? Who will send a reminder 24-48 hours before the meeting?
- ✓ What is the list of materials that need to be prepared (such as invitation letter, background material, topic workup information, agenda, list of participants, etc.)? Who will prepare and assemble the materials?
- ✓ Have written materials been prepared and sent to meeting participants? Have participants been given sufficient time to review the materials (one-week in advance is the "rule of thumb")?
- ✓ Are materials available in a format that is consumable for all participants?
- ✓ How will the meeting be evaluated?
- ✓ What is the plan for summarizing the meeting, and distributing to participants to ensure accuracy?
- ✓ How will second-order feedback, if necessary, be gathered?
- ✓ Will incentives be offered or necessary for adequate participation (e.g. child care, gift cards, stipends, etc.)?

Thoughtful preparation and planning can help avoid most meeting pitfalls. However, facilitators will not always be able to anticipate every participant need, dynamic and nuance. The real job begins when the meeting starts. It is the role of facilitator to recognize problems as they arise, and respond immediately and appropriately.

Meeting Facilitation Tools

There are basic tools that are important for every meeting, whether the meeting participants are a functioning team or have never met one another. Some of these tools are outlined below. It is important to consider, in advance of the meeting and as part of the planning process, which tools will be employed and how they will be used during the meeting.

Purpose Statement(s)

Meeting participants need to clearly understand the purpose of the meeting(s) and the focus of how they will spend their time together. They need to understand that AHRQ's Effective Health Care (EHC) Program is sponsoring the meeting and why. They also need to understand the role of AHRQ and any participating staff. These items can be covered in several ways, such as including a purpose statement for the meeting, or objectives and roles defined at the top of each agenda. Project descriptions typically include a purpose statement, list of participants, AHRQ and its role, description of the goal and a project timeline.

Agenda(s)

The agenda is the document that defines what will be done during a particular meeting or conference call. It should include the date, time, call-in instructions (if applicable), objective for the meeting and tasks to be accomplished. The facilitator uses the agenda in advance of the meeting to determine specific processes to be used, and during the meeting to keep participants focused. It is also prudent to allocate times for each agenda item so that participants know what to expect and can assist the facilitator with staying on time and task.

Ground Rules

Ground rules can be a useful group building exercise if the group is to meet over an extended period of time. Ground rules may be established in advance, they may be developed at the beginning of a meeting, or they may not be used at all. Ground rules set explicit expectations about the meeting, its conduct, and appropriate ways for participants to interact with one another. They also can help make sure that participants understand the boundaries of group discussion, and how decisions will be made. Like purpose statements, ground rules can be included on an agenda, in a project description or as a stand-alone document or activity.

Meeting Summary

The meeting summary is an important record of conversations among stakeholders and researchers. It can be used to ensure an accurate understanding and reflection of the issues, concerns, and agreement of participants. It can be used as an opportunity to gather additional, or second-order, input. Since different processes may be used by different research institutions, meeting summaries can also be used to record processes and outcomes that can be later analyzed for continuous learning and improvement. Meeting summaries should capture the following information:

- Participants, including organization or institution represented (if any)
- Purpose of meeting

- Key points discussed
- Issues or concerns raised by stakeholders
- Areas of consensus
- Areas of disagreement

The meeting summary should also provide a brief synopsis of the discussion and conclusion, and describe strategies used to arrive at a disposition of topics or issues presented.

Meeting Evaluation

It is important that meetings are evaluated for effectiveness in process as well as for achieving the meeting's purpose so that facilitators continue to learn and enhance their facilitation skills. Evaluation can be done in many ways, including setting aside a few minutes at the end of each meeting, use of anonymous evaluation forums, employing follow up email or electronic evaluation tools, or other techniques. Regardless of the method chosen, participants should be asked about what worked well, what could be improved, and what suggestions they have for next time. Evaluations should consider gathering input in the following areas:

- Facilitator knowledge/ability
- Meeting materials
- Overall meeting effectiveness
- What was effective and/or beneficial about the meeting
- What was ineffective and/or frustrating about the meeting
- Changes to improve the meeting's effectiveness

Meeting evaluations can offer an additional avenue for feedback, particularly for participants who may not be comfortable speaking up.

Meeting Alternatives

Not all stakeholders may be able to attend conference calls or meetings. And, some may be hesitant to provide feedback in new settings that involve multiple participants of varying backgrounds whom they have not met or been oriented to. It may be necessary to provide additional, or diverse, avenues for involvement to encourage participation. Alternative methods to consider include:

- Web forums
- Surveys
- Feedback and evaluation forms
- Written testimonies
- Focus groups held at already-occurring meetings of consumers
- Individual interviews

Focus and Staying on Track

Just as important to preparation is the ability to keep participants focused and on track during the meeting. Some of the "focus" work can be done in the preparation stage, by ensuring that all participants understand the purpose of the meeting, and come prepared to participate. Making sure participants understand the purpose of the meeting, and any ground rules, provides a foundation for the facilitator to keep the meeting focused and on task. To focus effectively during the course of the meeting, the facilitator will need to pay attention to both the process and the content of the meeting. The goal of the facilitator is to stay on track and balance participation (process) with meeting results (content) so that both are as supportive as possible to participants. The following steps can provide guidance:

1. Introduce the meeting purpose and participants (in general), referring to each participant as an "expert" in his/her role and experience related to the topic.
2. Ask all participants to introduce themselves, and say a sentence about why they agreed to participate.
3. Review the meeting purpose (again), agenda and any ground rules.
4. Orient participants to their role, and the roles of AHRQ, investigators, research institutions and other participants.
5. If no ground rules have been established, assist the participants in developing them. If no ground rules will be established, indicate how participants will be called upon or sequenced for discussion. Also indicate other discussion guidelines the facilitator intends to use (such as no acronyms).
6. Use visual or verbal summaries to manage information flow (see below).
7. Interrupt the discussion as necessary to refocus and keep it on track (see below).

Process Interruptions

Occasionally, it may be necessary for the facilitator to interrupt the meeting discussion in order to refocus participants or rebalance interactions. The field of facilitation refers to this as a "process intervention." Most often, such interventions by the facilitator can simply refer back to the agenda, meeting purpose statement or ground rules.

Some common concerns or situations requiring facilitator interruption include:

- Side-bar conversations
- Conversation domination
- Staying on time
- Silence among participants
- Staying focused on the agenda topic
- Run-on discussions
- Conflicts of interest or biases

The following techniques may be useful when a facilitator finds it necessary to interrupt the discussion. Use of gentle humor may be helpful in utilizing the following techniques. In all accounts, apply a positive, friendly tone that treats participants with respect.

Side-bar Conversations

- ✓ Specifically re-focus on a particular topic or reference a particular agenda item.
- ✓ Use a "parking lot" designated on a flip chart to capture issues that need to be addressed, but which are not the focus of the meeting.
- ✓ Ask questions about relevance to the topic.
- ✓ Especially if previous attempts have not been successful, make eye contact (in face-to-face meetings) or use the person's name. Make a direct and personalized request.

Conversation Domination

- ✓ Establish time-limits for comments as part of the meeting ground rules.
- ✓ Invite others to comment on or respond to the participants points.
- ✓ Use a round robin technique inviting each participant to briefly comment or voice an idea in turn.
- ✓ Record ideas so participants see and feel the group has acknowledged their comments.

Staying on Time

- ✓ Specifically re-focus on a particular topic or reference a particular agenda item.
- ✓ Use a "parking lot" to capture issues that need to be addressed, but which are not the focus of the meeting.
- ✓ Keep things moving
    - ► *"We appreciate your input, but let's keep things moving. Does anyone else have a response?"*
    - ► *"Thank you for your comments and for sharing your perspective. Does anyone else have something to add?"*
- ✓ Indicate the need to close the discussion on time, after giving a five minute "time warning."
- ✓ Ask participants what needs to be covered in order to conclude the discussion.
- ✓ Give participants a choice in how they spend their meeting time.
    - ► Is the topic being discussed more important that the remaining items on the agenda?
- ✓ Offer solutions and ask the group for validation or support.
- ✓ If there appears to be insufficient information to progress, suggest moving the item to the agenda for another meeting.

Silence among Participants

- ✓ Smile and nod to encourage participants who look hesitant to speak.
- ✓ Prompt the group with indirect questions.
    - ► *"Let's hear other perspectives that might not have been voiced yet."*

- ✓ Directly encourage less vocal stakeholders to share and participate by recognizing their value to the group.
    - *"[Name], do you have any feedback? Your expertise as a [title] is very important to the topic."*
    - *"[Name], we have not heard from you, what are your thoughts related to this question? Are we capturing what is important to you?"*

Staying Focused on the Agenda Topic

- ✓ Reference the purpose statement, ground rules, or other preparation materials.
- ✓ Specifically re-focus on a particular topic or reference a particular agenda item.
- ✓ Use a "parking lot" to capture issues that need to be addressed, but which are not the focus of the meeting.
- ✓ Set boundaries, but validate participants' contributions.
    - *"I hear that you are frustrated that this issue is not on the agenda and that it is important to you. Perhaps we can set a time to discuss your concerns further after the call so that we can make sure we get to all of the agenda items."*
- ✓ Offer solutions and ask the group for validation or support.
- ✓ Ask questions about relevance to the topic.

Run-on Discussions

- ✓ Specifically re-focus on a particular topic or reference a particular agenda item.
- ✓ Summarize the discussion and key points made by participants to ensure participants feel their perspectives are heard and allow for clarification
    - *"So far, what I have heard you say is . . . . Is that accurate?"*
- ✓ Give participants a choice in how they spend their meeting time.
    - Is the topic being discussed more important that the remaining items on the agenda?
- ✓ Offer solutions and ask the group for validation or support.
- ✓ Put the process on hold and take a break.
- ✓ Ask questions about relevance to the topic.

Conflicts of Interest, Bias, or Discord between Participants

- ✓ Reference the purpose statement, ground rules, or other preparation materials.
- ✓ Set boundaries, but validate participants' contributions.
    - *"I hear that you are frustrated that this issue is not on the agenda and that it is important to you. Perhaps we can set a time to discuss your concerns further after the call so that we can make sure we get to all of the agenda items."*
- ✓ Offer solutions and ask the group for validation or support.
- ✓ Put the process on hold and take a break.
- ✓ If participants seem critical of each other, use verbal discussion summaries to move discussion to an idea, and away from a person.
- ✓ Especially if previous attempts have not been successful, make eye contact (in face-to-face meetings) or use the person's name. Make a direct and personalized request.

- ✓ Talk with individual participants between discussions or meetings.

Visual or Verbal Discussion Summaries

One of the key elements to successful facilitation is managing all the information the participants are producing with their discussion, as well as the information they are reacting to (when provided data in advance). It is the facilitator's role to ensure that all participants understand what is going on, what is being discussed, and what is being proposed or agreed to. It is also the facilitator's role to accurately capture, describe and summarize this set of information to participants.

If the meeting occurs in person, one common method is to keep a running tally of comments, ideas, discussion, and agreements by using flip charts, computer projections, or other visual techniques. The advantage of this method is that participants can "see" what is going on, and can help ensure the facilitator is accurately capturing the issues. If the meeting occurs via phone or web conference, electronic web-based virtual meeting tools or shared materials can be used. Virtual meetings that do not employ these techniques will require that the facilitator regularly and frequently summarize the discussion verbally and take a pulse check from participants.

Some facilitators use a note-taker to keep track. This frees the facilitator to focus on group dynamics, staying on task, meeting processes and other aspects of facilitation. Others prefer to have more direct control over what is recorded. Either way, capturing information at the right level for the meeting purpose, summarizing without substantively changing input, or knowing when to summarize or ask for clarification are all skills that require practice.

Facilitators should find the tools and techniques that work best for them, the participants and the meeting logistics. Then, practice until the chosen method does not affect the ability to facilitate.

The following techniques may be useful in managing and summarizing all the information participants are reacting to and producing with their discussion.

- ✓ Write it down, and hang it on the wall, or use a visual electronic tool that all participants can see.
- ✓ Work on one issue at a time. Guide the group, if necessary, in determining how to work on the issue.
- ✓ When someone offers an idea or suggestion, write it down. If it is offered again (by the same participant, or someone else), refer or point to it. Adjust as necessary.
- ✓ If a participant seems critical or disrespectful of another participant, point to an idea and redirect away from a person.
- ✓ If appropriate, further develop an idea that has been listed using pro/con, qualifications, additions, etc.
- ✓ Write down and or repeat group agreement or consensus.

- ✓ When the group gets off track, write down the side bar issue. Call attention to it. Give the group the choice to change the issue, return to the agenda topic, show how one affects the other, or put a time limit on the side bar discussion.
- ✓ If there is to be another meeting, determine time, date and place. Write it down or repeat it twice.

External Facilitation

In some circumstances, employing an external facilitator may be warranted. Having an external facilitator allows the research team to fully participate in all aspects of the meeting. Further, a neutral outsider can assist with facilitating conversations on contentious topics to ensure all view points are equally expressed. The use of external facilitators may add to the cost of the project and thus might not be feasible.

Characteristics of an External Facilitator

- ✓ An understanding of (or willingness to learn) the particular research project and process
- ✓ The capacity to provide services required by the research project (e.g.nominal group technique, Delphi method, etc.)
- ✓ Documented experience facilitating diverse, multi-stakeholder meetings
- ✓ Engaging personality
- ✓ Willingness and availability to meet with the research team prior to the meeting to understand the needs of the project
- ✓ Engages in active listening
- ✓ Pause and probe to encourage conversation
- ✓ Observes nonverbal responses

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