The Leader's Conversation

DEFENSE EQUAL OPPORTUNITY MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE
DIRECTORATE FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Dr. Richard Oliver Hope Human Relations Research Center
Directed by Dr. Daniel P. McDonald, Director
366 Tuskegee Airmen Drive Patrick SFB, FL 32925
321-494-2747

DEOMI PRESS

This Guide

This guide was developed to provide leaders with recommended methods for conducting group conversations dealing with sensitive or controversial topics in a safe, controlled environment. Conducting these conversations can help reduce interpersonal conflict and tension caused by differences in members' perceptions, ideas, beliefs, or opinions. Leaders' ability to actively engage in discussions around sensitive topics in a respectful and non-attributional manner can help them maintain a high-performing and cohesive team and a healthy unit climate. This is not intended to be an all-inclusive guide; the methods and strategies discussed may be tailored as needed.

Suggestions for improvements and additions to this guide should be submitted to the DEOMI Research and Development Directorate, 366 Tuskegee Airmen Drive, Patrick Space Force Base, Florida 32925.

Internet Site

The Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI) website, located at www.defenseculture.mil, provides a variety of tools, training products, and information to support leaders across the Department of Defense in improving their organizational culture. Scan the quick response code to the right with a smart device to directly access the website.

Disclaimer

Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations, express or implied, in this guide are solely those of the contributors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense or any other U.S. federal government agency. DEOMI does not endorse the content of any specific reference material or the organization that is the source of the material.

Contents

Overview

Just engaging in a conversation about a controversial or sensitive topic can make some people anxious, and anticipate a conflicted and emotional interaction. Some may feel they will be attacked or judged for their views, and hesitate to participate; others may become emotional when certain topics are broached. A well-facilitated conversation, conducted in a safe, non-attributional and non-retributive environment, can provide the organization's members an opportunity to openly discuss topics that concern them, and to hear others' perspectives.

The Leader's Conversation involves helping members feel comfortable talking about things they might not otherwise discuss in a public setting. It encourages members to learn from each other by providing an environment where:

- Leaders identify particular topics that can be sensitive or controversial
- Mechanisms are established to safely guide members through the topics
- Group members can safely discover their own—and others' perspectives
- Leaders and team can identify potential strategies and ways forward

This guide is a consolidation of techniques we believe a facilitator should know and understand. Some of the steps for preparing for this type of discussion are in Section I. Section 2 will discuss the roles of each participant in the conversation. Section 3 will discuss how to prepare for the conversation. Section 4 will outline the conversation, and Section 5 will provide details for each step of that outline. Section 6 will suggest strategies for facilitators, and Section 7 will specifically address managing group dynamics.

SECTION I

Nine Steps for Facilitating The Leader's Conversation

1. Read this entire document. It will provide techniques for setting up your session, getting the conversation started, and keeping the conversation flowing in a constructive way.

2. Pick a location for your conversation. It may be a physical location, or even through an online discussion platform such as Microsoft Teams or another approved forum.

3. Identify your participants (15-20 people) and invite them to participate in this important event. Group size and demographics are important, and may determine the level and quality of participation you get.

4. Schedule your Equal Opportunity, Equal Employment Opportunity representative, or other special staff member to attend to assist in answering questions or when providing responses to difficult questions.

5. Review your discussion questions in advance. Review these questions with your Equal Opportunity or Equal Employment Opportunity representative if you have any questions or concerns. Add other items of interest to this list if you have them. If you are asked questions about topics that you are unfamiliar, do not panic. This isn't a pop quiz—just tell the participants you don't have all the answers, but you will try to get them later. Defer questions to your Equal Opportunity or Equal Employment Opportunity representative, if they are attending.

6. If you feel comfortable doing so, invite your Public Affairs representative to attend and observe the conversation.

7. Prepare your room at least 15 minutes in advance to meet and welcome participants as they arrive.

8. Conduct your session. Begin your session by explaining your role, and what you expect to get from this discussion.

9. Thank the group for their participation. Leave them on a positive note, and make them aware of your envisioned way forward.

The Participants

To conduct a successful conversation, a skilled facilitator should always lead the session. If the unit does not have any skilled facilitators, consider requesting assistance from outside your organization. A skilled facilitator can make or break the session. In addition to a skilled facilitator, here are some additional considerations for a successful discussion:

- Depending on the topic being discussed, it may be necessary to solicit additional help to assist in the process. If topics lead to highly emotional issues, have specialized staff (chaplain, medical professionals, or others) on call to address follow-up needs. If a member needs to leave the room, have a designated individual escort them to ensure they are safe. If necessary, escort them to the appropriate staff for assistance to address their concerns.
- Other considerations are the setting for your conversation. Will it be conducted in one room or via an online "chat" system? Explore the requirements for a virtual session if you use this manner. Modify your plan to fit the appropriate setting.

The Facilitator

As a facilitator, you are the group leader, responsible for guiding the discussion. Facilitators accomplish this by:

- Interjecting questions/ideas where appropriate

- Providing direction

- Refereeing when needed

- Settling disputes

- Greasing the wheels (when stuck) and ensuring the group continues to move forward

- Encouraging the group to solve problems on their own (e.g. creating new programs or products)
- Assessing your personal style: Everyone has a different method of facilitating groups. Some are formal, others are less structured. Whatever your style, select the method that is best for you.
- Selecting a co-facilitator: You should select a co-facilitator(s) who compliments your style the best. It is always advisable to work with someone with whom you feel comfortable. Your style and those of your co-facilitators should blend.
- Being flexible. Be alert to changes and be able to adapt to them without detracting from your session.
- Being observant of what happens with the group
- Paying attention: Facilitators and team members must show that they are paying attention. Paying attention demonstrates that you value each of them.
- Listening: Demonstrate you are listening to each group member when they respond. Acknowledge individuals who are speaking and ensure they are not interrupted.

- Analyzing the current environment and realities; review recent local or national developments that may impact the discussion
- Asking questions periodically: Periodically question the group to find out where the group is and how far the group has to explore the topic

The Co-Facilitator

Facilitating a group, especially a large one or one covering a difficult topic, can be a demanding and strenuous task. You may decide to have a co-facilitator assist you. It is important to select an appropriate co-facilitator; when selecting the co-facilitators, consider:

- Assigning portions to facilitate or present
- Selecting portions that appeal to your co-facilitator
- Choosing partners who will complement your style
- Discussing what you will do if you encounter an issue, and what your roles will be in resolving it.

The Process Observer

A third possible role is the process observer. While not required, this individual can provide additional benefits. Many times, when discussing issues of race, ethnicity, or cultural differences, they can become intense and heated. At times like this, it is difficult for a facilitator to hear and see everything that is happening in the group. Since it is important that all comments are responded to and all behaviors are recognized, we suggest that, whenever possible, a process observer is used to assist the facilitator. The process observer sits quietly apart from the group and takes mental notes. As the facilitator, you should always give the process observer something specific to observe. The process observer does not get directly involved in the discussion. Give the process observer a time period to observe. After that time period, the process observer will share what he/she has observed with the group. The process observer should give specific feedback about concrete behaviors and statements in a non-judgmental manner.

1. The process observer could be:

   a. The co-facilitator
   b. Another leader or functional expert from outside the group
   c. The Equal Opportunity or Equal Employment Opportunity Practitioner

2. The process observer's tasks:

   a. Sits (quietly) away from the group; makes mental notes for future follow-up
   b. Observes both verbal and non-verbal communication(s)
   c. Observes something specific for a 15-30 minute period
   d. Shares observations with group; provides specific, non-judgmental feedback
   e. Assist a member who needs to leave the room

Note: Introduce the process observer to the group, and explain his/her role in paying attention to the facilitation process and developing feedback. We recommend that you don't use written notes. But if you do, explain that the notes are only for use when clarification is needed, or

during the conversation. All notes must be deleted at the end of the conversation; ensure that they are destroyed.

3. The process observer should look for:

   a. Group Atmosphere

   - Cooperative vs competitive

   - Friendly vs hostile

   - Change in atmosphere and cause of changes

   b. Participation Level
   - Who is talking more/less?

   - Who is making facial gestures after particular topics/comments?

   - Does it appear as if someone is quietly watching who says what with the intention of reporting it back to someone?

   c. Commitment and Synergy
   - Are members focused on bettering the organization?

   - Are members working towards an end state or goal?

   - Are members working together?

<div align="center">The Group Members</div>

The group's size often proportional to the amount of dialogue one may expect. Smaller groups may have more interaction between members. Larger groups may bring more experiences to the table, but often hinder open discussion between all members. You should decide which size group you wish to facilitate. A group of between 15-25 individuals is an optimum size, as it will provide a wide range of experiences to draw upon. Groups larger than 25 are less manageable, and should be avoided. In larger groups it is important to gently encourage the contribution of shy members, without overly pressuring anyone to participate.

The demographic profile (race, ethnicity, gender, and rank/position makeup of your group members) is another consideration. Input by junior members may be stifled if more senior members are present. Groups of only one racial or gender group may give you only one view of the issue, and allow little discussion and perspectives between group members. Whether the group is homogeneous or diverse may impact the conversation in different ways. For example, some people are more comfortable speaking freely in a homogeneous setting. If the group is racially diverse, you may see people from different groups offer very different perspectives. Keep in mind that discussions about racial issues can make people feel uneasy, and it is important that you convey that all perspectives are welcome. Inter-racial dialogue can be a positive experience if all members of the discussion are both heard and respected.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both a homogeneous and a diverse audience. If homogeneous group discussions are conducted with minority members, they should also be conducted with majority members. If homogeneous discussions are held with women, they should

also be held with men. A good general rule to use is to select a demographic profile that matches your organization. The Equal Opportunity or Equal Employment Opportunity representative should be able to assist in identifying a balanced audience for the discussion.

Preparation Considerations

Purpose. To ensure you have a successful conversation, take the time to prepare for the expected and the unexpected. Additionally, some preliminary fact finding, and analyses should also be considered, including:

1. The expectations and requirements for the event:

   - Time requirements and constraints

   - Location, facilities, and equipment needs to include if you are conducting the session through an online discussion/chat forum

   - Respective responsibilities (e.g. who will do material designs and development, reproduction, arrange for facilities, refreshments, and other tasks and costs)

   - Projected goals and objectives, (e.g. desired outcomes, both short- and long-term)

   - Projected target groups

2. Considering participants in reference to:

   - Participants' personal expectations

   - Ways in which participants hope to incorporate learning into existing or new functions and responsibilities

   - Participants' current knowledge of and attitudes regarding the proposed topic.

   - Similarities and diversity of backgrounds and experience

   - Culture, ethnic, and language make-up of the group

Once you've reviewed your goals and objectives select your co-facilitator(s) and process observer to work with you. Remember, it's critical to remember the importance of creating and maintaining an effective team. Here are some tips on how to do this:

Tips for Building an Effective Facilitation Team

Coordinate with your co-facilitator and process observer prior to the session. Discuss everyone's roles, the process, and questions to be used. Very little that happens during the actual session should come as a surprise. Here are a few additional tips:

- The primary facilitator should stay in the room (even when the co-facilitator is facilitating)
- Offer to write on flip charts, observe or manage small group interactions, role-plays, and other activities
- Discuss intervention/interjection techniques with your co-facilitator *prior* to the session

- Always use skilled facilitators so that their unique talents, such as preparing visual aids, playing music, role playing in demonstrations/scenarios, recording group conversation, etc. are maximized

- Initiate prompt handling of distressed, disruptive, or intrusive participants or other distractions while partners are facilitating

<div align="center">Site Preparation</div>

Create a discussion-friendly environment to enhance participants' receptivity. Select a room with adequate acoustics, lighting, and ventilation. Additionally, other potential considerations include the:

- Arrangement of seats, tables, audio visual aids, room for spreading out discussion aids

- Participants' access to audio-visual material and placement of easels and their ability to see clearly

- Maintain comfortable room temperature

- Supplies including pens, pencils, and note taking paper for participants' use

- Arrangement of all handout materials in a sequential, orderly, accessible fashion, with enough for all participants

- Checking of the site in advance to ensure that the room can be rearranged if necessary

- Seating is comfortable; have tables available if needed

- Multimedia visual aids are working

- If refreshments are provided, make sure they are delivered on time

- Sign forms to record members' attendance (when applicable)

Other considerations include the setting for conducting your conversation. Can you comfortably fit everyone in the room? Are you doing this through an online "chat" system? Will all members be viewable with access to an online camera? How will you manage the group/process in an online system? Are all participants familiar with the aspects of an online chat and how to access the available controls? Modify your plan to fit the appropriate setting.

The Process

Below is a basic discussion outline, which will be discussed in detail in Section V:

1. Welcome participants
2. Establish ground rules and group expectations
3. Conduct an ice breaker (if desired) – designed at getting participants relaxed and talking, and to learn a little about each individual's background and experiences
4. Introduce the group to the process
   a. Introduction and motivation
   b. Purpose and objectives
5. Potential discussion and format
   a. Current societal/organizational events
   b. Perceptions and Stereotypes
   c. Barriers to inclusion in the workplace (harassment, race, gender, religion, etc.)
   d. Challenges to overcoming these differences
   e. Strategies to overcome barriers
6. Facilitate group conversation
7. Key points, summary, and closing

Conducting the Conversation

Now you are ready to conduct your session. Following the above format, here are some things you should do:

1. Welcome your group: To create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, welcome everyone when they arrive. If possible, arrange the chairs in the room in a circle so that participants can maintain eye contact with whoever is speaking. Inform them that you are facilitating a discussion with them on a specific topic (e.g. race, gender, or ethnicity). Remind them that their open participation is important for the discussion to be productive. Explain the discussion process.

2. Establish the ground rules: Explain what the ground rules are, and how they apply in the current setting. Use ground rules to provide order to the discussion and to allow each of the participants an opportunity to speak and be heard. Establish the nonnegotiable ground rules. Ask the group if they would like to add to the list of ground rules. If there are additional suggestions, add them. Post the ground rules in a prominent place so all can see them. Refer to the ground rules occasionally during the session if any are being violated. Suggested ground rules include:

   - No interruptions when others are speaking; only one person speaks at a time. Give members time and respect to complete their comment

   - Disagreements are okay; personal attacks are not. Everyone is entitled to their opinion, just as you are entitled to yours. Respect that everyone will not always agree. In other words, agree to disagree

   - Respect others' opinions and concerns. Reflect upon what was said before you respond

   - Avoid judgmental questions beginning with the word "Why"

   - Set and use guidelines for handling self-disclosures and/or extraneous diversions

   - If offended by something said, provide the speaker feedback about what you reacted to

   - Agree to participate fully; be truthful and honest in your answers

   - Allow all participants an opportunity to voice their views

3. Conduct an Ice Breaker exercise. The Ice Breaker gives you an opportunity to assess your group, and gives group members an opportunity to learn something about each other.

4. Introduce the group to the process. Reiterate the welcoming remarks and the importance of their participation and maintaining an open mind. For many, race/ethnic/gender issues are some of the most difficult things to openly talk about. Service leaders feel strongly about the importance of developing and maintaining a cohesive and inclusive work force. This session is an effort to understand the many intricacies of our professional working relationships, so that all understand the varying perspectives and feelings about the topics.

5. Discussion format. Select the topic that you would like to explore with your group and how you wish to do it. Potential conversation-starting questions are provided below. They cover a variety of different topics. Review them and consider which you would like to use. Understand, you may not get to all the questions. The point is to open up a dialogue. Modify or tailor questions as necessary to meet your needs. Another potential format to use includes processing a conversation through the following order, using tailored questions or your own:

- Perceptions and Stereotypes – Quite often people respond to "different people" negatively without ever being exposed to or in the company of someone from the group. This may happen based on how they were socialized and what they were taught about the "different" group. The perceptions they hold affect their behaviors and interactions, and can lead to conflict. We are going to involve you in an exercise designed to help you understand the impact perceptions have on interactions, decision making, and mission accomplishment. You will acquire an increased awareness of how perceptions translate into action.

- Barriers to cohesion and trust in the workplace (sexual harassment, race, gender, religion, etc.)

- Identifying barriers to overcoming these differences

- Strategies to overcome these barriers

6. Group Conversation. Facilitate the group through the discussion. Ask questions on your selected topics, then give members a moment to reflect upon them. Observe members' body language and bring it up with the group. Ensure all members have had the opportunity to provide their views. Key points to watch for:

- Don't talk after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond directly to each other. The most effective discussion leaders often say little, but are constantly thinking about how to move the group toward its goal

- Don't be afraid of silence. Use it to your advantage. It will sometimes take a moment of reflection before someone formulates a thoughtful comment

- Don't let anyone dominate the conversation; try to include everyone. Draw out the quieter, subtler members

- Ensure that each comment made to the group is acknowledged in some way, even if non-verbally

- When trying to decide when to intervene, err on the side of non-intervention. Don't allow the group to make you the "answer person"

- Help participants identify "common ground," but don't try to force consensus

7. Key Points & Summary. Summarize for the group the conversations of the day. Reflect back upon the initial group expectations and what the group has accomplished.

8. Closing. Be sure to thank the members for their participation and candid remarks.

- If there were any areas not fully explained or defined, during the closing, facilitators should use this time to provide additional information and encourage members to conduct additional research on that topic
- If there were areas where members might have been offended, explain why, as well as the consequences of offending someone
- Explain the importance of communicating and discussing concerns to better understand situations from others point of view; identify some strategies on how to inform someone when you are offended or treated unfairly
- Explain the positive results of an organization whose members work together, look after others, and trust each other

- Respect others' opinions and concerns. Reflect upon what was said before you respond

- Reinforce that this was conducted in a non-attributional and non-retributive environment

- Conclude the session with a sense of completion by tying in some of the comments from the conversation

- Leave the group on a positive footing, and provide your envisioned way forward

Selecting your Conversation

Identifying current trends, patterns, or unknown specifics are key to your conversation. Then, taking that information and guiding the group to self-discover realistic strategies is essential. Developing and selecting your questions plays a major role in this facilitation strategy. Selecting your questions invites participation and gets people to think about issues from different perspectives. The skilled use of questioning techniques is not as simple as it seems. The facilitator should keep questions limited; the maximum that can be effectively asked in the time allowed is a dozen or fewer. Therefore, a careful analysis of the information needed and the questions to ask is required before you begin. There are several types of questions that can be used, depending on the information you are trying to gather. The following section provides specific topics and candidate questions that facilitators can select from or tailor for their conversations.

The Leader's Conversation: Open Forum

Facilitator reads: "Welcome to today's conversation. Today our conversation will be slightly different. The intent is an open topic discussion. We will take approximately fifty minutes to talk and discuss items of concern to each of you. Each topic will be limited to approximately ten minutes, and I will ask to move on to the next topic to permit enough time to identify everyone's concerns. Once we hit the fifty-minute mark, we will take a ten-minute break. During that time, I will group the discussion points by similarities. After the break, I will read back some of the comments, and ask you to explore strategies to address the concerns you identified as a group."

Facilitator's note: Approximately 2/3rd of the time should be devoted to self-discovery and awareness, 1/3rd of the time (prior to the conclusion) should be focused on prevention, responding to, and reporting inappropriate behaviors.

Facilitator's note: Depending on the group size, number of facilitators, and resources available, this discussion could be completed with multiple small groups (as stated above) for fifty minutes followed by a ten-minute break. During the break, the facilitators combine comments from all the groups, identifying common themes without focusing on the individuals who brought them up. For the last thirty minutes, bring the groups together, so that they can work together to determine strategies to address the identified concerns.

Facilitator reads: "As we conduct this conversation today, our goal will be to discuss your current concerns in a controlled atmosphere. I am going to request that you do not discuss who or what is right, or who or what is wrong, only the current situation.

Facilitator note: Do not ask every question below. Consult with your Equal Opportunity advisor/ specialist (or individual responsible for your organizations sexual harassment prevention program) and your commander to determine the best and most appropriate questions for your organization. Be prepared to ask follow-up questions and clarification

Facilitator reads: "Let's begin with:"

- What are some topics you would like us to discuss today?
- What are some of the concerns you see affecting us as a society?
- What are some of the concerns you see affecting this organization today?

- What challenges are you experiencing in your work or personal life?
- What challenges do you see others experiencing around you?
- What are some ways we can overcome these challenges?

Facilitator reads: "Thank you for your input today, we will now take a ten-minute break and meet back up _____."

Facilitator note: After the break, state the concerns (arranged by topics) and encourage the group members to explore achievable and realistic strategies together with milestones as needed. When possible, post the information in a visible location as a reminder to how they worked together to solve their concerns.

The Leader's Conversation: Societal Concerns (Media, Politics, Protest, etc.)

Facilitator reads: "In watching the news, listening to the radio, reading information online, or talking to someone, and a lot of things are going on in the world today. Everyone has different ideas, values, and beliefs."

*Facilitator Note: Prior to your discussion, familiarize yourself with DoDD 1344.10, and The Hatch Act (*referenced at the end of this document*). Consult with your organization's legal department as needed.

Facilitator reads: "As a Service member, or a member of the DoD, you are limited in what you can do or say when it comes to participating in events or publicly discussing specific topics. This is not to take away your rights as an American citizen, it is done to ensure your independent views do not reflect the entire military or the DoD. As an example of this, Service members are not permitted to participate in political protest in a military or civilian (work related) uniform."

"As we conduct this conversation today, our goal will be to discuss current concerns in a controlled atmosphere. You will not discuss who or what is right or who is wrong, only the current situations and what your role is as a member of the DoD."

Facilitator note: Do not ask every question below; consult with your Equal Opportunity advisor/ specialist (or individual responsible for your organizations sexual harassment prevention program) and your commander to determine the best and most appropriate questions for your organization.

Facilitator's note: Approximately 2/3rd of the time should be devoted to self-discovery and awareness, 1/3rd of the time (prior to the conclusion) should be focused on prevention, responding to, and reporting inappropriate behaviors."

Facilitator reads: "Let's begin with:"

- What are some topics you have recently heard that are going on in the world?
- What are some topics you have recently heard that are going on in your organization?

    Anticipated Responses (for both items) may include: political, religious, or racial discrimination; riots, an imbalance of rights, money, or power; protest (peaceful and non-peaceful); and various other items.

- What is it about these topics that leads individuals to discuss, act on, or feel so strongly about these topics?
    Anticipated responses: individual values, beliefs, today's culture, tired of individuals/groups not being treated fairly, ongoing racism, discrimination, etc.
    Additional potential responses: individual's upbringing, parental or societal culture, lack of awareness
- How are these same topics effecting our workplace?
- For what reasons should members of the DoD participate or not participate in protest?
    Anticipated responses:
    - Others at the protest could make an example out of you (e.g. physically harm you)
    - Media or individuals could misinterpret your true feelings

- Individuals/organizations could interpret your views as the view of the entire DoD
- What should you do if asked to participate in an upcoming protest?
- What should you do if you are requested to discuss your political or social views by a reporter or journalist? What if you are unsure? What should you do?

Anticipated response: "should not engage in partisan political activity, and that members not on active duty should avoid inferences that their political activities imply or appear to imply official sponsorship, approval, or endorsement, the following policy"[1]

Additional response: If on a military installation, immediately notify your chain of command

- What concerns do you have pertaining to your roles or responsibilities relating to Societal Issues (Media, Politics, Protest, etc.)?

Additional Resources:

- DoDD 1344.10 *Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces*
- The Hatch Act contains restrictions on political activity by Federal Government employees and by employees of certain State and local government agencies. To view the more detailed information, go to the U.S. Office of Special Counsel website

---

[1] DoDD 1344.10

General Background Information for Facilitators

The following additional information should be considered when conducting your conversation.

When establishing rapport with your group and build trust and confidence as a leader:

- Project warmth and genuine interest
- Actively listen to what is being said and read between the lines (What is *really* being said)
- Paraphrase for clarification
- Empathize but do not take sides
- Encourage participation and discussion by encouraging openness and sharing control

When establishing credibility

- Know your topic inside and out
- Use expert knowledge/experience in your audience

Additional supportive facilitator techniques:

- Learn your group members' names, and use them
- Validate and affirm relevant comments, observations, and interventions
- Acknowledge participants' experience and expertise
- Establish clear boundaries
- Make yourself available to address individual/group concerns
- Tailor the program to use participants' ideas and concerns

Using listening as a fundamental skill. Listening requires accurate hearing and verification of information heard. Paraphrasing what someone said can clarify the information. As you listen, look at the person speaking, and try to grasp both the content and meaning of the words. This may be made less difficult by minimizing:

- Internal distractions – thoughts developed while someone else is talking. Sometimes these thoughts are related to what the person is saying; other times you may be thinking about the next question you might ask. Try to eliminate these internal distractions that keep you from focusing on what is being said.
- External distractions – things happening around you that compete with the speaker. (noises outside the room, two people whispering, etc.) Try to exclude them or try not to give them any of your attention.

Discussion Questions

Questions invite participation and get people to think about issues from different perspectives. The skilled use of questioning techniques is not as simple as it seems. The facilitator should keep questions limited; the maximum that can be effectively asked in the time allowed is about 10-12. Therefore, a careful analysis of the information needed and the questions to ask is required before you begin. There are several types of questions that can be used, depending on the direction you want the conversation to take. Here are a few considerations when making your selections:

- Open-ended questions: Elicit a more complete response and more effective participation and require more than a "yes" or "no" answer. The majority of your lead-off questions should be open-ended questions to stimulate as many responses as possible.
- Direct questions: Ask explicitly for a reply on a specified topic. Use the: who, what, when, where, why (as previously mentioned, be careful on how you use this one), and how strategy. These questions are more likely to be directed at a specific individual and should not be used to self-incriminate someone.
- Paraphrased questions: The facilitator repeats the participant's last response in his/her own words, then follows with a question seeking additional, related information.
- Narrow questions: The facilitator selects the subject matter to discuss and refines the question to acquire specific information.
- Polling questions: An uninvolved group member (e.g., participant who is quiet or displaying body language that signals a lack of interest or an unwillingness to participate) is a challenge. To encourage quiet or withdrawn group members, it is helpful to use a polling technique in order to elicit each participant's feelings about a particular issue. Avoid serial questioning (i.e., asking each participant to comment in the same order on every issue).

The following types of questions are *not* helpful, can be counterproductive, and should be avoided:

- "Why?" questions: We do not want to appear judgmental; these may trigger defensive reactions. Before using this question, consider how the receiver will interpret it. Whenever possible, reframe the question to eliminate this potential conflict.
- Loaded questions: A loaded question contains a controversial or unjustified assumption response, taking the respondent in a direction the facilitator wants to go.
- Leading questions: These are accompanied by a suggestion of what the answer should be.
- Yes/no questions: These are closed-ended and do not elicit useful information explaining the participants' feelings or opinions.

Question considerations

If you want to:

- Stimulate everyone's thinking, *then* direct the question to the group.

- Allow the group members to respond voluntarily or avoid putting an individual on the spot*, then* ask a question like "What experiences have any of you had with this problem?"

- Motivate one person to think and respond, *then* direct the question to that individual.

- Use the known resources of an "expert" in the group, *then* direct the question to that person: "SGT Smith, you have had a lot of experience in this area of discussion. What would you do in this situation?"

Guidelines that will affect the amount of group participation:

- Always reinforce answers positively

- Minimize potential embarrassment for wrong or incomplete answers

As a facilitator, you may experience the group asking you questions. If this occurs, you have three options:

1. Redirect the question to the group; this option demonstrates they can work together to solve their own problems.

2. Provide the answer yourself when you are the only person with the knowledge.

3. Defer the question when it is beyond the scope of the group. If you need time to provide the correct answer, tell them so and get back to them later

Group discussion skills

Remember, a facilitator should strive for a situation where the group collectively discusses issues at hand and reaches a common consensus if possible. The facilitator should not want to dominate (overly) or completely take over a group. Ideally, the group will discuss, debate, analyze, and finally come up with a group position.

Group discussions do not always go smoothly. The facilitator must diplomatically and unobtrusively use different techniques to energize a stalled group discussion. Facilitator techniques include: re-directing group thoughts, breaking up verbal altercations, clarifying points of misunderstanding, or whatever else must be done to keep the process moving. To do this, facilitators can use the following techniques.

- Structuring: To establish purpose and limits for discussion. This helps clarify what the group is doing here (purpose) and how far it can go with something (limits). *For example: Facilitator Lead-in: "What's happening in the group now?" "How is this helping us reach our goal?" or, "Good point, but that's really something we can't control."*
- Universalizing: To help participants realize that their concerns are shared. *For example: Facilitator Lead-in: "Who else has felt this way?" or, "Has someone else here had similar observations like this?"*
- Linking: To make connections between participant's statements, points, etc. *For example: Facilitator Lead-in: "Mary just made an excellent point." This sounds similar to what Joan and Sam said yesterday."*
- Redirecting: To promote involvement of all participants in the discussion, and to allow presenters to step out of the role of expert. *For example: Facilitator Lead-in: "What do others think about that?" or, "What do you think about Maggie's ideas?"*

- Disclosing goals: To help participants become more aware of the purpose of the group. *For example: Facilitator Lead-in: "Here are the goals we would like to accomplish in this presentation."*
- Brainstorming: To encourage participants to take part, to be unhesitant in generating ideas. *For example: Facilitator Lead-in: "Let's share our ideas. We won't react to any suggestions until we've listened to them all."*
- Blocking: To intervene in destructive communication. To deflect counterproductive discussion. *For example: Facilitator Lead-in: "Let's hear from some others." "I wonder how others feel."*
- Summarizing: To clarify and pull together what has been said and to determine what participants have learned. *For example: Facilitator Lead-in: "What did you learn from this discussion?" "What have we decided to do about this situation?" or "Let me go back a minute; so far we have talked about____."*
- Setting tasks and obtaining commitments: To develop a specific commitment from participants. *For example: Facilitator Lead-in: "What actions will you all take to solve or confront this problem?" or "What actions have to happen for this problem to go away?"*
- Promoting feedback: To help participants and facilitators gauge learning and level of accomplishment or satisfaction. *For example: Facilitator Lead-in: "How do you feel this session is going?" "How would you improve it?"*
- Promoting direct interaction: To get participants to speak directly to each other, when appropriate. *For example: Facilitator Lead-in: "Would you tell Joan how you feel about her feedback?"*
- Promoting encouragement: To invite participants directly and by example to increase each other's self-esteem and self -confidence. *For example: Facilitator Lead-in: "Thank you for helping us out." "What are some things Carol does that you like?" "Who noticed John's contribution(s)?"*

Time Management

Time is your most important factor, so let's talk about managing it. As sessions progress you may find yourself lagging behind your timetable. Have a clock in your and your co-facilitator's view (on wall in the back of the room can work). Pay attention to time; do not lag behind:

- Co-facilitators use signals to keep you on time or move participants forward.
- Parking lot - list items to be discussed later that you could not get to now (unfinished business).
- Make a point to start your session on time even if only a few people are present.

Note: Set an atmosphere of doing things on time by your schedule.

Conflict Management

To facilitate your sessions successfully, you must be able to deal with conflict, which may occur. Conflict can lead to a variety of communication problems and misunderstandings. Conflict is neither bad nor good, but in our attempt to deal with conflict, we can set off constructive or destructive consequences/behavior. Conflict is a natural part of life, and groups are likely to

experience conflict during their sessions. Conflict is inevitable because people will always have different viewpoints, ideas, and opinions. The question is: how will you deal with or relate to these differences?

There are three levels of conflict: interpersonal, intra-personal, and inter-group. It might be helpful in defining conflict if we have a clear understanding of what these three levels are, and their relationship to one another.

- Interpersonal: happens between two or more people. An example of this would be when two people interact or come together to accomplish a common goal or objective; however, their different backgrounds, personalities, and experiences may make attaining the goal quite difficult.
- Intra-personal: happens within one's own inner self; also known as "self-communication". An example of this would be a Service member who feels guilty about telling sexual or ethnic jokes, but still participates when friends are around.
- Inter-group: exists between two or more groups. An example of this could be when there is contact or interaction between organizations. Issues of group cohesion, "sticking together, leadership and status, power or influence, and limited resources" often represent sources of inter-group conflict.

What to look for during your conversation

Managing personalities: Different personality types will likely be present in any group discussion. Some members will be very vocal, willing to speak their mind and provide input on any topic. Others will be quiet and reflective and may not be willing to open up or provide their perspective. Still others may have their own agenda, and try to influence their fellow participants. Some may ramble on continuously. The effectiveness of the group and the value of the information you receive can be dependent on how well you identify and manage your participants. Below are some typical personality types you may find in your focus group, and some strategies to manage their participation.

- The Dominator: Has something to say about each topic, and may try to dominate the conversation. Thank the dominator for his/her input and then state, "I'd like to hear what some others think about..." Avoid eye contact and scan the group for indicators that others wish to engage
- The Expert: Speaks from authority and may attempt to sway others to his/her thinking. Thank this person for his/her opinion, then make eye contact with others and ask them for their thoughts on the matter
- The Observer: May be very shy, quiet, or reflective. This person observes the group, but has little to say. Make eye contact with this individual and ask a direct question. Smile at the person and encourage him/her to respond
- The Rambler: Goes on, and on, and on. Refocus this individual on the question. Shift eye contact to another individual and ask for his/her perspective
- The Partisan and Obstructionist: Inserts unnecessary dialogue and refuses to move on to another area for discussion. Sometimes you will have to intervene when the discussion

gets heated and seems to be getting out of control. Use interventions to get things under control

Here are some examples of additional interventions:

- Move over and stand by the problem individual. Refer your attention and questions to other group members to break the individual's flow

- Speak with the individual privately and inform them of their impact upon the group

- Re-frame the intrusive comment in a positive way so as not to shut the individual down from further discussion

- Summarize and move on

- State: "Let's hear from someone else who hasn't had a chance to speak on this subject."

- Diffuse the interfering person by using them as an expert. Call on them periodically to give them limited "airtime."

At any point during your conversation, you observe individuals getting uncomfortable or the group starting to get out of control, consider taking a break. A cooling off period may be needed. However, just because the conversation gets a little "heated" does not mean it needs to be stopped. You want individuals to converse, but it should always be respectful. If you feel it is starting to get out of hand, stop the comments and refer the group to the ground rules. We may never agree; but we should at least listen to what the other members have to say. *Don't use breaks as a solution too often; it could interrupt the process.*

Facilitation do's and don'ts

DO	DON'T
Position your body so that you face all the members.	Turn your back to part of the group.
Smile at participants at appropriate times.	Frown or look judgmental.
Listen carefully while they talk.	Shuffle papers or look at your watch.
Watch while they are talking.	Avoid eye contact or stare at individuals.
Maintain eye contact.	Talk to only a few people.
Talk with all group members.	Remain uninvolved.
Nod affirmatively. (clarify up-front that nodding does not mean agreement, but that hearing/acknowledging what is being said).	Constantly talk trying to fill up the silence.
Allow pauses; let silence work for you.	Ask "Why" questions.
Rarely use questions beginning with "Why"	

What to Look for in a Group

In all human interactions there are two major components: content and process.

"Content" deals with the subject matter of the task that the group is working on. In most interactions, the focus of attention is on the content.

The "process" component is what is happening between and to the group members while the group is working. Group process or dynamics deals with such items as morale, feeling, tone, atmosphere, influence, and participation, styles of leadership, leadership struggles, conflict, competition, and cooperation, etc... In most interactions, very little attention is paid to the process, even when it is the major cause of the group's inability to effectively interact. Sensitivity to group process will better enable one to diagnose group problems early and deal with them more effectively. Since these processes are present in all groups, being aware of them will enhance a person's worth to a group and make them a more effective group participant.

Participation

One indication of involvement is participation. Look for differences in the degree of participation among members.

- Who are the more involved participants?

- Who are the less involved participants?

- Do you see any shift in participation, e.g. more involved members become quiet; less involved members suddenly become talkative? Do you see any possible reasons for this in the group's interaction?

- How are the silent people treated? How is their silence interpreted? Consent? Disagreement? Disinterest? Fear? Other reasons?

- Who talks to whom? Do you see any reasons for this in the group's interactions?

- Who keeps the ball rolling? Why? Do you see any reason for this in the group's interactions?

Influence

Influence and participation are not the same. Some people may speak very little, yet they capture the attention of the whole group. Others may talk a lot but are generally not listened to by other members.

- Which members are high in influence (when they talk others seem to listen)?

- Which members are low in influence (others do not listen to or follow them)? Is there any shifting in influence? Who shifts?

- Do you see any rivalry in the group? Is there a struggle for leadership? What effect does it have on other group members?

Decision Makers

Many kinds of decisions are made in groups without considering the effects of these decisions on other members. Some people try to impose their own decision on the group, while others want all members to participate or share in the decisions that are made.

- Does any member make a decision and carry it out without checking with other group members? For example, one person decides on the topic to be discussed, and starts right in talking about it. What effect does this have on other group's interactions?

- Does anyone make a decision and carry it out without others' input? Do you see any reasons for this in the group's interactions?

- Who supports other members' suggestions or decisions? Does this support result in deciding the topic or activity for the group? How does this affect other group members?

- Is there any evidence of a majority pushing a decision through over other members' objections? Do they call for a majority vote to decide?

- Is there any attempt to get all members participating in a decision? What effect does this seem to have on the group?

- Does anyone make any contributions that do not receive any kind of response of recognition? What effect does this have on the member?

Task Functions

Task functions include behaviors dedicated to getting the job done, or accomplishing the task that the group has before them.

- Does anyone ask for or make suggestions as to the best way to proceed or to tackle the problem?

- Does anyone attempt to summarize what has been covered or what has been going on in the group?

- Is there any giving or asking for facts, ideas, opinions, feelings, feedback, or searching for alternatives?

- Who keeps the group on target? Who prevents the topic from straying or going off on tangents?

Maintenance Functions

Maintenance functions are important to the morale of the group. They maintain good and harmonious working relationships among the members, and create an atmosphere that enables members to contribute. It ensures smooth and effective teamwork within the group.

- Who helps others get into the discussion?

- Who often cuts off others or interrupts them?

- How are members getting their ideas across? Are some members preoccupied and not listening? Are there any attempts by group members to help others clarify their ideas?

- How are ideas rejected? How do members react when their ideas are not accepted? Do members attempt to support others when their ideas are rejected?

Group atmosphere

The way individuals communicate with each other determines the atmosphere where individuals will or will not be willing to talk and connect with each other. In addition, people may differ in the kind of atmosphere they prefer during group conversations.

- Who seems to prefer a friendly, congenial atmosphere? Is there any attempt to suppress conflict or unpleasant feelings?

- Who seems to prefer an atmosphere of conflict and disagreement? Do any members provoke or annoy others?

- Do people seem involved and interested? Is the atmosphere one of work, play, satisfaction, taking flight, sluggish, etc.?

Membership

A major concern for group members is the degree of acceptance or inclusion in the group. Different patterns of interaction may develop in the group that gives clues to the degree and kind of membership.

- Is there any sub-grouping? Sometimes two of three members may consistently agree and support each other, or consistently disagree and oppose each other.

- Do some people seem to be "outside" the group? Do some members seem to be more "in?" How are those "outside: the group treated?

- Do some members move in and out of the group? Under what conditions do they come in or move out?

Feelings

During group conversation, feelings may be displayed through the interactions among members. However, these feelings are seldom talked about. Feelings are real, and should be acknowledged. Acknowledging feelings helps members feel valued and heard. Facilitators may have to make guesses based on tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and many other forms of nonverbal cues. Do you see any attempts by group members to block the expression of feelings, particularly negative feelings? How is this done? Does anyone do this consistently?

Norms

Standards or ground rules may develop in a group that controls the behaviors of its own members. Norms usually reflect the beliefs or desires of the majority of the group members as to what behaviors should or should not take place. These norms may be explicitly defined and clear to all members, or implicitly known or sensed by only a few, or operating entirely below any group member's awareness level. Some norms help groups progress, and some hinder them.

- Are certain areas avoided in the group (e.g. sex, religion, present feelings within the group, leader's behavior, etc.)? Who seems to reinforce this avoidance? How do they accomplish it?

- Are group members overly nice or polite to each other? Are only positive feelings expressed? Do members agree with each other too readily? What happens when members disagree?

- Do you see norms operating regarding participation, or the kinds of questions that are allowed? (e.g., "*If I talk, you must talk.*" "*If I tell my problems, you have to tell your problems.*") Do questions tend to be restricted to intellectual topics, or to events outside of the group?

REFERENCES

Auvine, B., Densmore, B., Extrom, M., Poole, S., & Shanklin, M. (2002). *A Manual for Group Facilitators.* The Center for Conflict Resolution. Rutledge, MO.

Belser, J. R., Shaw, M. E., Robbin, R. (1981). *Group dynamics : the psychology of small group behavior.* Spain: McGraw-Hill.

Bertcher, H. J. (1994). *Group Participation: Techniques for Leaders and Members*. India: SAGE Publications.

Blanchard, K. H., Parisi-Carew, E., Carew, D. K. (1984). *Group Development and Situational Leadership: A Model for Managing Groups.* United States: Blanchard Training and Development.

Chief of Naval Operations. (2011). Navy Equal Opportunity (EO) Policy (OPNAV Instruction 5354.1F CH-1). Washington, DC: Department of the Navy.

Cinnamon, K. M. & Morris, K. T. (1976). Controversial Issues in Human Relations Training Groups. *Group & Organization Studies, Volume: 1 issue: 1, page(s): 126-127.*

Commandant of the Coast Guard. (2005). *Coast Guard Equal Opportunity Manual (U.S. Coast Guard Commandant Instruction M5350.4B).* Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security.

Department of the Army. (2008). *Commander's Equal Opportunity Handbook (Training Circular 26-6).* Washington, DC: Department of the Army.

Feldt, J. A. & Moore, A. B. (1993). *Facilitating Community and Decision-making Groups.* United States: Krieger Publishing Company.

Galanes, G. J., Adams, K. H., Brilhart, J. K. (2003). *Effective Group Discussion: Theory and Practice*. United Kingdom: McGraw-Hill Education.

Hare, A. P. (2000). *Creativity in Small Groups*. United States: Sage Publications.

Jandt, F. E. (1973). *Conflict Resolution Through Communication*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Lesly, Philip (1979). *How we discommunicate.* New York, NY: AMACOM Books, Inc.

Secretary of the Air Force. (2010, October 5). Equal Opportunity Program Military and Civilian (AF Instruction 36-2706). Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force.

Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (2018). Department of Defense Instruction 1020.03, Harassment Prevention and Response in the Armed Forces. Washington, DC: Department of Defense.

Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (2018). Department of Defense Instruction 1325.06, Handling Dissident and Protest Activities Among Members of the Armed Forces. Washington, DC: Department of Defense.

Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (2018). Department of Defense Directive 1344.10, Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces. Washington, DC: Department of Defense.