

5 TIPS FOR GREAT FACILITATION

Tip #1 – Silence is Golden

I will tell you that I still struggle with this one (since I'm a big talker) but a key to good facilitation is developing a healthy respect for silence. The silence can feel unbearably long and your mind starts racing with doubt – “*Did they understand my question? Is anyone interested in this topic?*” To cover, we often try rephrasing the question or asking a different (hopefully, more interesting!) question altogether. Meanwhile, the audience was still thinking about your first question... now they're totally confused. Which question do you want them to answer?

To avoid this entire mess, pause long enough to allow attendees to absorb the context of your question and mentally prepare their responses. This can take time so have a sip of coffee or water while you wait it out. The longer the silence the higher the likelihood that someone will eventually speak up to break the verbal log jam.

Tip #2 – Avoid Compound Questions

I can't tell you how many times I've been in the audience when the speaker asks, “*So how many of you have done [insert initiative] and why?*”. As an attendee I don't know if I'm supposed to raise my hand for a tally or answer the question.

Break this into two pieces and lead with a simple, “*Raise your hand if you've done [insert item]*” and then follow up by calling on certain individuals to address the “*..and why?*” portion of your query. Asking a compound question is doubly challenging when you commingle the quantitative and qualitative. Put yourself in the shoes of the audience and make their lives easy.

Tip #3 – Ease Them Into It

Speaking up in a crowd is tough. Most people abhor public speaking and revealing information outside of the familiar walls of your company requires a trusted environment. Don't walk into the group and put out a zinger question and expect everyone to jump in and chat away.

Recognize this and warm your audience up before you expect them to break down and admit their deepest fears. Here's the idea... give them LOTS OF CLUES that talking among the group will happen. Perhaps set up an intro where you frame the conversation for a few minutes and then start asking questions (aka “*opening up the room for dialogue*”). Even better, tell them the question you will ask well in advance. Then avoid the qualitative personal response questions and instead use the “*show of hands*” option a few times. This gets people's bodies moving, drives a little more interaction, and warms them up to being called upon. Then you're ready for Tip #4...

Tip #4 – Stimulate Dialogue

Have you ever seen a facilitator call on someone in the group to provide color and as soon as the last words leave the commenters mouth, the facilitator is on to the next topic? Does that feel like a conversation to you? Probably not, and it won't feel like a conversation to anyone in the room either.

If someone is providing color, ask a few thoughtful follow-up questions. This healthy exchange might trigger ideas for others in the room and it provides time for them to formulate thoughts and jump in. You must built momentum and follow the natural flow by embracing unique points of view within the context of the broader discussion. Now that the conversation is humming, let's keep it going...

Tip #5 – Control The Droners

Nothing kills engagement more than a droner. If one person goes on and on about their experiences (whether on topic of off) you will absolutely lose your audience. How many times have you seen audience members quietly pull out their Blackberry and get up and "stretch" in the back of the room? That's all code for, "*You just lost my attention.*"

Instead, wait for the droner to take a breath and then jump in with, "*So it sounds like what you're saying is [blankety-blank]; anyone else have that same experience?*" If they're not breathing (droners are superhuman) then you have to simply cut them off completely, but politely. Cite time constraints as the culprit, offer to parking lot their issue or take it offline and move on. Make sure you call on someone else to talk so Mr. Blah Blah doesn't grab the reins again. This takes practice and more than a little courage. The goal is to make them feel listened to while acknowledging the need to move on.

In summary, talk less, listen more – it's about them, not you. And since even this post is about you, please share your thoughts on great facilitation in the comment section below. After all, it's the only way to keep the conversation going.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgbc-uCSRaw>