

# ANTI-OPPRESSIVE FACILITATION

## MAKING MEETINGS AWESOME FOR EVERYONE

Inefficient and ineffective meetings can leave people feeling drained, exhausted or discouraged, rather than inspired and energized. Good meetings help build strong, effective organizations and successful projects. Even organizations with great meeting process inadvertently perpetuate barriers to full member participation and access to democratic process. This happens through group dynamics of power, privilege and oppression that often marginalize women, people of color, queer, trans and gender non-conforming folks, people with disabilities and those with limited access to the cultural cues and financial resources that come with class privilege.

Whether or not you tend to act as facilitator at meetings you attend, building your facilitation skills will help you make your meetings better, more inclusive, and more fully democratic! Here are some foundational tips and suggestions that can have big impacts on your meetings!

## WHAT IS FACILITATION, ANYWAY?

**Facilitation ensures that the group is empowered as a whole.**

- Be sure that everyone gets to participate and share ideas in a meeting, not just those who feel most comfortable speaking up and making cases for their ideas or proposals.
- Work to prevent or interrupt any (conscious or unconscious) attempts by individuals or groups to overpower the group as a whole.
- Keep an eye out for social power dynamics and work to interrupt these. Point out and address discrepancies in who is talking, whose voices are being heard.
- Help the group come to the decisions that are best for the organization/whole group. Help people keep an eye on what's best for the group, rather than their personal preference.
- Ensure the group follows its own agreed upon process and meeting agreements.

**Facilitation keeps an eye on time, and juggles it with the (ever present) need for more time.**

- Offer periodic time check-ins.
- Help keep the group conversation on topic and relevant. Prevent ramblings and tangents.
- Make process suggestions to help the group along.
- Summarize discussion and note key areas of agreement, to help move the group forward.

## CONTAINERS FOR YOUR MEETINGS

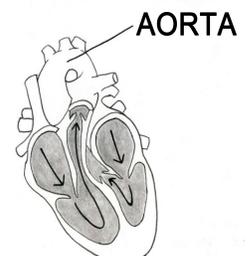
Things like community agreements, an agenda, an available chart of your group's decision making process, a place to store important topics for future conversations, next steps, etc are important foundations for a meeting-- we call them "containers." They act as visual tools that participants and facilitators can come back to throughout the meeting to help keep the group focused, on track, on the same page. They also offer direction for moments when things get sticky or tense.

### Community Agreements

Community agreements help define your role as facilitator and clarify the group's expectations of you. One of your big responsibilities to the group is to make sure these agreements are upheld. This isn't about creating rules-- it's about creating and clarifying agreements and expectations that allow everyone in the group to participate. In order for these to be meaningful, they need to come from the group itself. Once a group creates its

ANTI-OPPRESSION RESOURCE AND TRAINING ALLIANCE

[www.aortacollective.org](http://www.aortacollective.org)



agreements, they can be used over and over. As a facilitator, you get to contribute to this list, too.

Here's some community agreements that can be helpful in meetings, to get you thinking:

#### ONE DIVA, ONE MIC

Please, one person speak at a time. (It can also be useful to ask people to leave space in between speakers, for those who need more time to process words, or are less comfortable fighting for airtime in a conversation.)

#### NO ONE KNOWS EVERYTHING; TOGETHER WE KNOW A LOT

This means we all get to practice being humble, because we have something to learn from everyone in the room. It also means we all have a responsibility to share what we know, as well as our question, so that others may learn from us.

#### MOVE UP, MOVE UP

If you're someone who tends to not speak a lot, please move up into a role of speaking more. If you tend to speak a lot, please move up into a role of listening more. This is a twist on the more commonly heard "step up, step back." The "up/up" confirms that in both experiences, growth is happening. (You don't go "back" by learning to be a better listener.) Saying "move" instead of "step" recognizes that not everyone can step.

#### WE CAN'T BE ARTICULATE ALL THE TIME

As much as we'd like, we just can't. Often people feel hesitant to participate in a workshop or meeting for fear of "messaging up" or stumbling over their words. We want everyone to feel comfortable participating, even if you can't be as articulate as you'd like.

#### BE AWARE OF TIME

This is helpful for your facilitator, and helps to respect everyone's time and commitment. Please come back on time from breaks, and refrain from speaking in long monologues...

#### BE CURIOUS

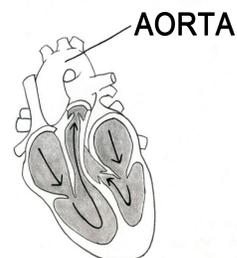
We make better decisions when we approach our problems and challenges with questions ("What if we...?") and curiosity. Allow space for play, curiosity, and creative thinking.

NOTE: There's a few community agreements that participants often bring up that we don't tend to use or bring with us. Two of the most common ones are "assume best intentions" and "default to trust." The reason we don't use these is because when someone is unable to do this (say they're feeling untrusting of someone, or unsafe), having a community agreement telling to do so isn't going to change anything. Put short, these agreements aren't always possible, especially when we take into consideration that when people have been harmed by sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, they/we build up necessary tools to take care of and protect themselves/ourselves. Agreements we offer instead that capture the spirit of these are "we can't be articulate all the time," "be generous with each other," or "this is a space for learning."

#### **The Magic of an Agenda**

There are many different ways to build an agenda to match the style, culture, and needs of each group or meeting. However you do it, a clear and well-constructed agenda that all participants can agree to, is a crucial step for an efficient, inclusive, and awesome meeting. The facilitator's job (generally) is to both keep the participants on track to both following the agenda as well as to pay attention to when the agenda isn't working

ANTI-OPPRESSION RESOURCE AND TRAINING ALLIANCE  
[www.aortacollective.org](http://www.aortacollective.org)



and changes need to happen. Here are some best practices regarding agendas:

- Set the agenda before the meeting starts. Building it over email, through a list that is kept in an office, or at the end of the previous meeting. This helps everyone come well researched and mentally and emotionally prepared.
- Some groups like a more emergent and organic style for building an agenda. If this is your group, participants can spend the beginning of a meeting writing each agenda item they'd like to discuss on an index card, and then the group can use different visual tools to select the card(s) people are most moved to talk about. The down side: you don't know what you're talking about in advance, so can't prepare, or share your thoughts in advance, if you're not able to attend.
- Review the agenda at the beginning of the meeting. Share your reasoning before asking for amendments or changes. It is important that the whole group.
- Announcements and report back at beginning can save a lot of time.
- Give it variety: mix up the length and type of agenda items.
- Put agenda items that will be easy successes early in the meeting. This sets a positive tone and builds momentum!
- Follow with the "big stuff."
- Break after big discussions.
- Schedule breaks for any meeting more than 90 minutes. After this length of time, groups fall into the trap of "decision fatigue," making big decisions rashly or getting stuck talking in circles on smaller decisions.
- Finish on something short and easy-- end with a good tone.
- Have the agenda on paper, so that all can see it (either on flipchart, blackboard, printed out).
- Label items with their expected actions: decision, discussion, play, evaluate, brainstorm, review, update, silence, feedback, appreciations and concerns.

### **Garden/ Bike Rack/ Topics for Future Meetings**

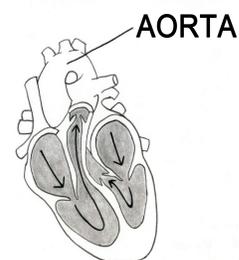
Whatever your group chooses to call it, have a sheet or on-going list to write down ideas, questions, and topics for future meetings that come up. Often in the course of talking about one topic, really important things surface that need to be addressed, but are not on the current meeting's agenda. Unless they are urgent/time sensitive, it can really help keep the group on topic to have a space to note them so that they can be incorporated into future meetings (and not forgotten about!).

### **Next Steps/ Who, What, When, Priority**

It can be very helpful to keep a sheet where you're taking running notes on any next steps or tasks that are coming out of the meeting. We sometimes do this in three (or four) columns: one for **who** is doing the next step or task (this could be an individual or a group), **what** it is they're going to do, by **when** they will have done it, and what **priority level** the task is (1-3, 1-5). You can end the meeting by reviewing this sheet and filling in missing details. You can also start your meetings by checking in with the sheet from the previous meeting.

## **TIPS, TOOLS, TECHNIQUES**

ANTI-OPPRESSION RESOURCE AND TRAINING ALLIANCE  
[www.aortacollective.org](http://www.aortacollective.org)



## Tools You Can Use

Some simple tools that can drastically shift the energy of a meeting, might help you hear new voices, and invite the perspectives of quiet, introverted, or more silenced participants:

- Start the meeting off with **quick check-ins** (even something as simple as “three adjectives to describe how you’re feeling,” or “one thing that went well and one challenge from the week”) on how folks are doing, so you know where folks are at when they walk in the room.
- Build in a couple minutes for **quiet journaling/thinking** before launching into group discussion.
- Start an item off with conversations in **pairs or small groups** before coming back to the whole group. Often you’ll get deeper this way and end up with better, more creative ideas.
- Do a **round robin/go-around** to hear from everyone. (People can always pass if they’d like).
- Hosting part of a meeting with everyone **standing in a circle** (if they’re able) can help wake people up, decrease tensions, and support more concise statements.
- Asking participants to **switch seats** after a break or agenda item also helps to energize and mix things up. This can be really helpful when the group is feeling stuck.
- Taking a **straw poll** can help you get a quick read of how close the group is to a decision, whether or not there is unity, and which topics are key to focus discussion on. You can check in with folks whose opinions diverge most from the majority to see what’s going on for them. Straw polls can look a lot of ways:
  - Vote yes/no/maybe
  - Vote for your one favorite of multiple options
  - Vote for all the options you support (more than one is ok)
  - Rate how you feel about the proposal/idea on a “fist of five,” one finger meaning “I really do not support this,” five fingers meaning “I love this.”
- Incorporate ways of gauging people’s opinions that **involve their bodies**, such as asking folks to walk to one side of the room if they are for the proposal, the other side if they’re against it, and to stand in the middle if they’re unsure. Then, hear from a few people from each position. Let folks move as their opinions change.

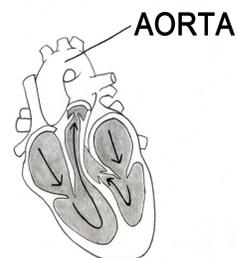
## Common Mistakes (will happen. Keep an eye out!)

- Not having a co-facilitator when you need one.
- Rushing the group. (Sometimes going slower takes less time in the long run).
- Not setting clear boundaries for yourself in your role as facilitator, getting pushed around by the group.
- Not taking a break when YOU need one. (When the facilitator needs a break, it’s to everyone’s advantage to have a break!)
- Spiraling down into group process *about* group process. (You know, when you spend 10 minutes deciding as a group by consensus whether you want to allot 10 more minutes of discussion to an item).
- Not leaving time and space for people’s feelings.
- Becoming inflexible or unwilling to adapt the agenda/plan to meet the group’s evolving needs.
- Forgetting to get additional support-- a notetaker, logistics coordinator, someone to set up the meeting space, etc.
- Meeting for too long a time period without food, water, and/or breaks.

## Red Flags and Dynamics to Watch Out For

- Unhealthy, unchallenged, or unnamed power dynamics.

ANTI-OPPRESSION RESOURCE AND TRAINING ALLIANCE  
www.aortacollective.org



- People interrupting each other or the facilitator.
- People repeating or re-stating what others have said.
- Tone and body language: Do people look upset? Checked out? Bored? Angry? If you see this, check in with the group as a whole, or quietly with individuals.
- Individuals monopolizing conversation.
- Individuals or small groups bringing a fully-formed idea to the meeting, without any group conversation, brainstorming, or feedback, and wanting it passed that very day.
- Back-and-forths between individuals.

### What to Do When You Get Stuck

- Use the agenda and expected actions. Have you switched into “decide” mode when the desired action was “feedback?”
- Take a break: Have small groups work out a proposal based on what they've heard about the needs of the group. (What's needed for a decision?)
- Ask questions to initiate discussion, as opposed to jumping directly into concerns. Questions assume the proposal writer(s) thought about the concern, and allow them to respond with their reasoning.
- When people are voicing concerns, ask them what can be done to meet their concern.
- Do people need a refresher of the decision making process your group uses?
- Listen for agreement and note it, no matter how small. This both builds moral and helps clarify where the group is at.
- Reflect back what you're hearing. Practice synthesizing and summarizing.
- Break big decisions into smaller pieces.
- Don't allow back and forths between two participants to dominate a discussion or agenda item: ask for input from others.

## RESOURCES

- [Collective Visioning](#) by Linda Stout
- [Facilitators Guide to Participatory Decision Making](#) by Sam Kaner
- [Gamestorming: A Playbook for Innovators, Rulebreakers, and Changemakers](#) by Dave Gray
- [Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities](#) by Adam Kahane and Peter M. Senge
- [Visual Meetings: How Graphics, Sticky Notes & Idea Mapping Can Transform Group Productivity](#) by David Sibbet

