



## **Small Group Facilitator Tips**

### **GOOD FACILITATOR GUIDELINES**

- Set a an open and relaxed meeting tone • Foster curiosity and excitement
- Stimulate discussion and dialogue
- Generate ideas
- Listen, listen, listen

### **The role of the small group facilitator:**

The facilitator does not need to be an expert in the content of the session. Instead, the facilitator is leading the small group process – holding a space for the dialogue. The facilitator ensures each small group member has an opportunity to share and captures key group insights. A skilled facilitator fosters collaboration and teamwork and manages conflict among team members. Women at the Well Dialogue facilitators are primarily tasked to create a safe space for open sharing, encourage openness to diverse perspectives, and foster the deepening of relationship among CCA members. The purpose of small group sharing is not to move to consensus or action steps. If a summary report is expected at the conclusion of the small group session, the note-taker will capture key insights and provide the facilitator with their notes after the session.

### **Small group dialogues:**

Small groups are an opportunity for participants to discover and struggle with ideas and to learn something new. The content of the readings is certainly important, but the spirit with which the readings and reflection questions are discussed is even more so. Within a prayerful, open environment that promotes discussion in a challenging but affirming way, there is the opportunity for spiritual growth and faith formation. One member of the group can facilitate all the sessions or rotating facilitation can be used, in which several or all participants share the task. The facilitator does not need to be an expert on the session focus. The facilitator does need to read the material for the session and come prepared to help the group grapple with its central ideas. The role of a facilitator is not to have all the answers, but provide an environment for a successful gathering. The facilitator participates in the small group discussion as a member as well as guides the small group work as a facilitator.

## **Begin with a quick check-in:**

Check-ins encourage everyone in the room to focus on the meeting and each other. Additionally it is an opportunity for each member to use their voice, which once done may encourage them to jump in when you discuss responses to pre-reading & reflection.

## **During your check-in, ask questions like:**

- Before we get started with the agenda, what's on everyone's mind?
- What one word best describes your mood at this moment?

Check-ins only require a few minutes and yield valuable rewards. They allow people to get to know more about each other and bring people's attention into the room, so everyone is mentally present for the conversation.

## **Review desired outcomes:**

Ideally, the focus on small group discussion will be outlined in the facilitator training and welcome so everyone knows the goal of the small group dialogue. A brief review of the desired outcomes and agenda items gets the group aligned toward accomplishing the meeting goal.

## **Practice active listening:**

Active listening includes four steps: connect, absorb, feedback, and confirm. Here are some suggestions for putting these steps into action:

- **Connect:** Listen to each participant attentively and reinforce what is being said by maintaining eye contact or non-verbal responses.
- **Absorb:** Take in what each person says as well as their body language without judgment or evaluation.
- **Feedback:** Paraphrase and summarize what the speaker says back to the speaker.
- **Confirm:** Get confirmation from the speaker that you understand their points accurately.

## **Take Stock:**

When multiple participants want to speak at the same time, manage the process by jotting down the names of people who have something to say and letting each individual speak, one at a time, without interruption. Check each name off until everyone who wants to speak has done so.

### **Synthesize the main themes to reframe the conversation:**

Sometimes several different themes emerge simultaneously in a meeting. The dialogue may be too rich to capture all the nuances, therefore small group facilitators will be asked to provide additional feedback in their evaluation form. The small group facilitator feedback is an opportunity to share more detail or provide information on small group dynamics.

### **Pause and allow for reflection:**

As each person shares, pause and provide time for silent reflection. Participants may also write down their thoughts to help internalize what's been said and to identify concerns or questions free of the influence of others' opinions.

### **Encourage and balance participation:**

The facilitator should always be aware that some group members may be less vocal than others, and their voices are still important. The facilitator should create a safe space for them to engage. Ask open-ended questions to draw people out by name, like, "What do you think?" "What would you do?" and "What other ideas are you considering?"

### **Discussion Starters:**

Use sample starter questions to get things going, or whenever you need to restart the discussion.

- *Did anything surprise, excite, confuse, anger or upset you?*
- *What questions or concerns does the text raise in your mind?*
- *In what ways does what the author is saying relate to your experience?*
- *How does the text support or affirm your faith?*
- *How does the text challenge your faith?*
- *What faith questions does it raise for you?*
- *Has the text stirred you to some form of action? If so, what?*

### **Take a break and re-energize:**

When the energy in the room is low, or when people become restless, take a short pause. A reflective break is especially helpful for introverts who need to recharge from a lot of talking.

### **Provide closure:**

At the end of the meeting the facilitator can restate the key outcomes verbally which helps the group feel a sense of accomplishment.

## Dealing with Specific Issues:

From time to time you will face a group that has a member or two that disturbs the flow and small group plan. That calls for a more active role as a facilitator:

***Someone dominates the discussion:*** Suggest adding their concern to a piece of newsprint for later conversation.

***The group gets off track:*** Refocus the group by restating the question, small group purpose, or encouraging maintaining focus on the topic.

***Not everyone is participating:*** Invite those who have not spoken by name if they have anything they would like to add. Ask if everyone has had an opportunity to speak before moving on to another topic.

***Group members argue with one another:*** Ask for a brief moment of silence. Then ask each member of the group to list a pro and a con about the topic. Review group norms if necessary.

## Facilitator Preparation

**Prepare in Advance:** Read the readings and personally reflect on the reflection questions. Put yourself in the seats of your small group members. Come up with questions they might ask. If you are having trouble with the topic make sure to seek out someone with wisdom on the topic. You want to be sure that you are prepared and ready to discuss.

**Define meeting Structure:** It is imperative that you establish a group consensus so that everyone knows what outcome the group is after. You have to be perfectly clear if you want to lead the group effectively.

**Time-keeping:** If necessary bring a timer with you to stay on track with time. People dislike it when you go over on time and it erodes your trust.

**Note-taking (if using a note taker):** Have paper and pen; or computer to take notes, capture insights and jot down any information to share on your feedback form. Utilize a note-taker to take notes during the small group and share their notes for the final summary report to be submitted by facilitators.

**Summarize and state next steps:** Just as you stated your goals at the beginning, make sure that you summarize what was shared and provide next steps for the group.

**Embrace Silence:** Silence during group discussion is not a bad thing. Some people process things out loud and some people process things internally. As a facilitator, your job is not to talk the whole time or tell long stories. Facilitators that are extroverts have a tendency to talk until they find something to say. If this is you, you will need to be conscious and aware of making sure to let others discuss as opposed to you talking for a lengthy period of time. Your job is to

create the discussion by allowing others to talk. If silence remains for a couple minutes, ask the group “explain to me why there’s silence”, then allow them to talk, or silence to remain. Maybe the reason why the group is silent is because the question isn’t clear or people don’t understand what you’re asking them. After a couple more moments, ask the group “do you understand the questions?”, then stop talking again. In small group settings, silence is your friend.

A skilled facilitator can make a meeting feel thoughtful, cohesive, participatory, and even enjoyable. Yes, enjoyable.

Every facilitator has a different style, and every group has different dynamics. A skilled facilitator adapts to the needs of each particular team and meeting. She can get everyone to share their voices amidst the various personalities, opinions, and sensitivities that exist in any group of humans, while also guiding the group to achieve the desired outcome within the meeting time constraints.

### **Learnings from Previous Sessions:**

- Facilitators: don’t wait for people to show up in your group
- Give facilitators Celia’s cell phone #
- Facilitators are participants as well. Leave space for yourselves. They could remind their small group about this before the session begins.
- Unmute people before they go into their small groups (facilitator can also click ‘manage participants’ and then mute or un-mute people)