Sharpening your Facilitation Skills - Tip Sheet

A meeting is only as good as the facilitation. This tip sheet gives some tips for sharpening your facilitator skills. The facilitator is responsible for managing meetings, keeping conversations on track, and ensuring each member's voice is heard. The facilitator is careful not dominate the discussion but does at intervals sum-up the discussions in order to move to the next topic.

What is Facilitation?
To facilitate is “to make easier” or “help bring about.” (Merriam Webster). Thus, a facilitator has is the task of smoothly managing the flow and discussions of a meeting or event. The facilitator guides (without dominating) the dialogue and attempts to maximize member’s time and energy by keeping the discussions on track – in terms of time and topic.

What Makes a Good Facilitator?
Good facilitators establish and maintain a high energy level. They have both personal characteristics and acquired skills that make them good at what they do. Many good facilitators make a difficult process seem very natural and intuitive, even when lots of planning and training goes into the craft. Chances are, if you’ve volunteered to take on this role, you have the traits below or you have an inclination toward them.

- Good facilitators value people and their ideas
- Good facilitators think quickly and logically
- Good facilitators are skilled listeners
- Good facilitators are both product and process oriented

What are the Facilitator’s Basic Responsibilities?
As a facilitator, you will want to take some basic steps as part of your responsibilities during a meeting or event. Your job as a facilitator is to ensure that the group understands what needs to be accomplished.

The basics are listed below

- **Prepare in Advance.**
  
  Good facilitators make their work look effortless and natural, but prepare in advance to be effective. Take into consideration the “who, what, why, and where” of your meeting or event to help you figure out the “how.”

- **Plan and Distribute the Agenda.**
The meeting agenda is the document that defines what will be done at any particular meeting or event, and it helps both leaders and participants know what to expect and how to prepare. **State your objectives at the beginning of the event.** Members will be much better prepared to contribute and help you meet the objectives if they know what they are. It is suggested you work with a committee from the group to determine the intended outcomes. Your job as a facilitator is to ensure that the group understands what needs to be accomplished.

- **Establish Community Expectations.**
  - **Often people refer to this as ground rules.** In the case of PWN-USA you want the groups to be respectful and agree to uphold PWN’s vision and values. By stating PWN’s mission & values at the start, you’re more likely to see that happen.
- **Ensure that everyone gets a chance to speak**
  - Your methodology you use should include all members in the discussion and prevent one or two members from dominating the dialogue (including yourself). Everyone may not talk, but no one should feel excluded from the process.
- **Provide closure and reiterate action items.**
  - As part of ensuring that all ideas and points are captured accurately, it is also the role of the facilitator to ensure that action items are noted and that follow-up on the item is assigned to someone. On a flipchart, post people’s comments and key points so the group can easily recap. Plus, the people know they’ve been heard.

**Staying on-task and on-time.**
Your group may have a lot to get accomplished in a short amount of time. With groups of passionate and knowledgeable people, it is easy to veer off onto other topics or easily get side-tracked by minute details of a conversation.

⚠️ In order to help the group stay focused, you may first want to make certain that the facilitator is not the one veering off onto other topics by taking what’s known in the vernacular as “facilitator’s privilege” –(could find no meaning in Merriam Webster).
- Remind the group of the “keep focused” expectation
- Use the parking lot to “park” unrelated topics. For example, a facilitator may say, “We hear you. We’re going to park that issue over here for now. We will address it, but not right now.
- Don’t be afraid to directly re-focus the group on a particular agenda item
- Try to close the item or set it aside in a “parking lot” for consideration later
- Let the group decide