

# Notes for Facilitating a Group

*The best of all rulers is but a shadowy presence to his (her) subjects....  
When his (her) task is accomplished and his (her) work done  
The people all say, "It happened so naturally." [Tao Te Ching xvii 39, 41]*

## A. Preparing for the Session

### 1. What is meant by the word *facilitator*

The term *facilitator* commonly refers to a wide range of roles and activities in assisting a group, from conflict resolution to strategic planning. Facilitation can sometimes refer to simply leading a discussion, or it can mean having a significant degree of responsibility for designing the processes a group will use. It is important to be clear about what is expected of the facilitator, with regard to both limits and responsibilities.

The following pages address the situation of an facilitator who is guiding a group in a process that has already been designed. Some of the points covered may pertain as well to the broader matter of designing and adapting group processes, but these notes do not discuss the principles involved in designing group processes.

### 2. The group's orientation and preparation before the session

If the group has not yet been oriented and focused in its preparation for the session, it is helpful at some point in advance of the session to be sure that each member learns the specific purposes of the session, what materials are being used to focus preparation, the manner or methods of preparing, and how much time is expected to be spent in preparation. It is also helpful to clarify the "level of preparedness" that is expected, and how this session relates to a broader process in the group's life.

### 3. Materials to be used during the group session

Prepare in advance for what you yourself will need and what the group will need during the session: papers, books, writing instruments, display materials, accessories, etc. Be clear about what you will need to bring and what is being provided by others.

### 4. The environment of the session

It is helpful to check out the location in advance. Be familiar with the area where the group will meet, and try to ensure that the environment supports a tone appropriate to the group's agenda.

Consider the group's size and the various activities that will be used in working with the agenda of the session, in relation to

- seating arrangements
- traffic patterns
- acoustics
- noise levels
- visibility of those speaking and of any visual displays
- lighting
- ventilation

## 5. The facilitator's personal preparation

It is not expected that everything covered in the following pages will be new to you. You may find that much of what is discussed is already characteristic of your present “facilitating” behavior in one-to-one relationships or as a member of a group. But often a person's more effective behaviors can be impeded by one's own or others' expectations of an “facilitator,” or by being drawn into entangling conditions in the group.

It is not the facilitator's job to “carry the group,” or even the group's agenda. A group has to learn to carry its own agenda. The facilitator's role is to try to elicit human responses, not to guarantee and engineer outcomes. Facilitating a group is more about helping the group to balance and channel human energies. In its best effects, facilitating leads to a sense of clarity, cohesiveness, competence and commitment developing in the group, and in the process the group can learn facilitating behaviors that can become more natural and habitual in the group's life.

Materials and “techniques” for working at tasks are not what does the facilitating. These techniques and resource materials are instruments being used by a group of people, being guided by a person. Even when a group is working to produce a position-statement or a strategic plan, facilitation is an interpersonal activity. The materials and techniques and vocabulary of concepts you may be using are only tools, and how you use these tools has an effect on those you are encouraging to use them.

How you relate to the group is a central issue in facilitation. You set a “tone” by how you introduce procedures and shepherd the group in its activities, by how you remind the group of time constraints, limits, and relevant principles, by how you use concepts or humor or how you re-focus conversation when people become disconnected from a fruitful collective endeavor.

Keeping your own balance and being your better, down-to-earth self is a key to being an effective facilitator. The most effective way of inviting others to be un-postured and focused in conversation with one another is to “set the tone” by “setting the example” – “being yourself” rather than assuming a posture, and actually talking with the group rather than speaking from an impersonal and formal “distance.” An facilitator is a kind of catalyst, a person whose own "chemistry" in relating to the group is what has an effect in the dynamics of the group.

If someone else has oriented the group to the work of the session, in writing or orally, be clear about the purposes and objectives that have been communicated and what has been asked of the group. Be familiar with what has been provided for preparation. Review the objectives for the session, the materials to be used, the sequence and methods of tasks, and the time factors involved.

Prepare some notes that will help you remember what to say at various points in the session, as it begins and as the process unfolds. The issues discussed in Sections B through G may help you prepare an outline of what to speak about as you interact with the group.

## B. Convening the Group

1. Generally, it is important to honor an announced schedule for the start of an activity. If a session will begin late, it helps to let the group know the reasons for a significant or even a minor change in the starting time, and perhaps also to offer some suggestions for making use of the interval.

2. If the group has not yet assembled, deciding who calls people together and the manner of gathering people will vary with circumstances and protocol in the life of the group.

The formal beginning of a session may be signaled by someone other than the facilitator, particularly if the facilitator is new to the group. Generally it is helpful for a group leader or someone appointed by the leader to introduce the work of the session and to indicate that the role of guiding the group is being given to the facilitator.

If the facilitator is being introduced to the group for the first time, it may be helpful to discuss in advance what and how much will be said about the background and credentials of the facilitator. Points that may be helpful for the group to know include how the facilitator came to be known to the group, how the facilitator has become oriented to the work of the group, the reasons for inviting an facilitator to assist the group, and any significant points bearing on the facilitator's involvement in the group's processes.

Even when the group knows the facilitator in another role, it may be helpful for some of these points to be covered by a person convening the group or by the facilitator.

### C. Becoming “Composed” as a Group

1. Even if some remarks have been made by another person introducing the facilitator, it is important, particularly if the group does not know you, to say some things about yourself and your experiences that relate to the culture and concerns of the group.

If the group already knows you in another role, it may be helpful to make it clear how you are “stepping out of that role” during this session and entering into the group in a different role, in the interest of facilitating the group in its present agenda. It may be necessary to clarify how your role as facilitator differs from other relationships or roles you have with the group, by acknowledging what members of the group might expect of you if you were present in another role.

If the group is familiar with you as an facilitator but it has been some time since you were last with the group, it may be sufficient simply to speak a bit about what you have been involved with recently, or about some experiences that help you connect with the present agenda or needs of the group.

It is generally more effective to wait until after focusing the agenda of the session to say more about your style as an facilitator and how you will be working during the session to facilitate the group.

2. To help “compose the group” when the members in the group don't all know one another, or even if they do know one another somewhat, it is useful to propose one or two points that each one can speak about, to help establish something of a personal tone and a common ground in the group. It is generally not effective just to ask people to “introduce yourselves.” A usual response to that invitation is “name and place of residence or work.” These facts may be helpful, but something more is usually needed. And to begin by asking members of a group to “tell us something about yourself” can lead to a such a diverse range of responses and varied lengths of response that the group has no more a sense of common reference than before the “introductions.”

The “focus points” to help a group become composed should not be trivial or gimmicks. This activity is not a formality or a contrivance, but a real part of the process of relating to one another. It is also important not to propose a focus on personal experiences that presumes a level of trust and openness which is beyond the capacity of the group.

There is no “special set of focus questions” that will work for every group. One approach is to propose a focus relating to the life experiences of the group, as a kind of background for the agenda of the session, such as inviting each one to say something about how a recent common event affected their attitudes toward spending time on the issues that are proposed for the present session.

3. If the group members do know one another but are not regularly together as a group, or even if they meet regularly as a group, it can be helpful to hear from each one about their general “state of presence” to the session: recent activities, significant events, concerns, distractions, energy level, etc. Some matters that are occupying an individual's attention may not be related to the work of the session, and it is helpful for the group to know this.
4. Be clear in describing what the procedure will be. Suggest an amount of time for this activity that takes into account the number of people in the group and an average amount of time per person. Offer the focus points. It may help to say something to defuse performance expectations and help keep the anxiety level from rising; in the brief response each one will be making, people will not be expected to render a definitive account of themselves. Give a time frame for some brief reflection, and let them know if you will be inviting them to begin speaking and listening to one another. When you are about to invite the first person to speak, indicate how the speaking will proceed, whether randomly on personal initiative, or beginning with a particular person in the group and proceeding around the group in one direction or the other.
5. Even when the purpose or objective for bringing a group together has been announced, it is usually important to invite the members of the group to share with one another the outcomes each one is looking for. It is generally not useful to introduce this by asking “*What are your expectations.*” A less abstract way of inviting this will help set a more conversational tone, for example “*What do you hope we will have come to at the end of the session*”. Sometimes it may help to propose that each one say something about concerns or apprehensions related to the issues, and perhaps related to the effort of the group itself. The statements made here by each one are not topics for debate or investigation.
6. Different expectations about the session's outcomes may surface. Sometimes sharing hoped-for outcomes and concerns is itself a significant activity for the group, and what is being said may need to be newsprinted and then discussed in order to arrive at a more clearly focused agenda to which members of the group are committed. At the end of this sharing, the facilitator may need to respond or on some points may invite the group:
  - ~ to acknowledge the range of expectations or concerns
  - ~ to point out common phrases, threads, images
  - ~ to acknowledge the issues or outcomes which do not seem feasible because of
    - the time allowed for the session
    - the readiness of the group to deal with such a wide range of objectives in one session
    - the need to address issues in a certain sequence
    - the nature of the group
  - ~ to indicate what the facilitator is prepared to help the group move toward

7. It may be helpful to acknowledge briefly what strikes you about the state of the group, whether the condition of group seems hopeful, energetic, awkward, colored, weighted, etc. One indicator can be whether the members of the group are speaking to one another or to the facilitator. The feelings in the group may be diverse, and even conflicting. Some of these feelings may be related to broader factors in the group's life. It may be helpful to acknowledge this, and finally to focus on the "spirit" of the group in relation to the issue being addressed in this session.

#### D. "Situating" the Session and Becoming Focused for the Agenda

1. Some remarks on the physical environment and setting for the session may be helpful, particularly noting the ways these factors may affect the group during the session. It may be helpful to test out your assumptions about the setting with the group, or to invite the group to engage in a brief assessment of how the setting may affect their work.
2. The issue or issues being dealt with in any session are part of a much larger picture, and related to other issues. Other people may have an interest in the outcome of this session: the group may be formally or informally related to other groups, or one part of a larger group. Unless such points have been addressed just prior to the session, it can be helpful to recall these "contexts." If the broader contexts have been noted in earlier written or oral communication, remind the group what was said in this earlier communication.
3. It may also help to recall what members of the group have been asked to do, or what they have been doing as a matter of course, to prepare for the session. What others have done to assist them in their work can also be acknowledged: resource materials, points for reflection, etc. These facts can be briefly recalled by the group or by the facilitator.
4. Call the group's attention to the particular purpose and agenda for the session. This may have already been expressed orally or in written form prior to the session. If members of the group have the text in hand, call attention to how the purpose has been stated and the spirit in which it is expressed. When a purpose is more nuanced or when an agenda has several points, it may be helpful to have this written out in a readable public focus such as newsprint.
5. If some form of prayer is to be part of composing and focusing the group, it is generally more fruitful when this formal prayer activity takes place at this point in the process, rather than at the very beginning of the session. Ideally, the focus of the prayer should be determined by the acknowledged needs of the group. The prayer then serves to gather and focus what is happening in the group, and invites the group to be present to its needs in a stance of faith. In practice, a general sense of the group's needs can be anticipated if there is some reliable contact with the group. The method of prayer will vary with the customs and the abilities of the group, and the facilitator or others who may be preparing resources for the prayer activity need to be cautious about planning a form of prayer that is not appropriate to the needs or the abilities of the group.

#### E. Clarifying How the Group Will Proceed with Its Agenda

The objective of facilitation is not to impress the group with the facilitator's learning but, in various stages, to help the group internalize the meaning of its experiences, to own the effects of its actions, to make choices about its future course of action, and to commit to supporting the necessary changes in its behavior and the use of resources.

Your fundamental objective and “work” is to facilitate the confidence of group members in their effort to engage in the group’s agenda. Performance expectations, your own and theirs, may need to be tempered. On the one hand, there may be issues of too much enthusiasm and over-reliance on the process; on the other hand, there may be issues of discouragement or resistance.

The following suggestions may help you work in a way that builds the group’s confidence in its ability to engage in the process and take up its agenda.

1. Beware of using “jargon.” A group’s confidence will usually be adversely affected by strange vocabulary or by theoretical constructs and methods with which the group is unfamiliar, especially when the inference is that “those who are really enlightened” see and do things “the facilitator’s way.”

As was mentioned in Section B, the materials and techniques and vocabulary of the concepts you may be using are only tools. How these tools are used has an effect on those who are asked to use them. The facilitator’s preferred “tools” of language and method usually have to be translated and adapted into the cultural framework of the group.

If it is necessary to introduce a new way of thinking about or working with the group’s agenda, allow enough time to adequately teach the group new methods or a new way of looking at things, including time for the group members to discuss how they understand the new approach and to give the facilitator some feedback.

If you are planning the process for a session, it’s important to inquire whether a particular process or method is familiar to group members, and what their experience with the process or method has been.

Beware of introducing a process that is significantly beyond the trust level in the group or beyond the reflection skills of group members. Some members of the group may be able to stretch their customary trust level or experiment with a new way to reflect on their agenda, but others will either go through the motions superficially or become confused or wind up resisting the process.

Be cautious about introducing an overly nuanced process or technical methods unfamiliar to the group, and trying to teach the methods to the group (and the concepts behind the methods) in the same session they are expected to use them.

Be careful that the group doesn’t get the impression, from the vocabulary or the complexity in presenting the session’s methods, that the methods are “difficult” or “perhaps even beyond the group’s abilities.” In this case also, a group will directly or indirectly resist or just go through the motions or become frustrated if the facilitator’s vocabulary and methods are viewed as “foreign” or “too complicated.”

2. Call attention to the overall time-frame of the session, and to how much time is expected to be spent in the various activities of the session. It may be helpful to comment on the likely effects of the available time – limitations and possible advantages – in relation to the expected outcomes from the session.

It can also be helpful to situate the work of the session in its larger context, by relating the time being spent on an issue in the present session to what has already taken place in the group’s life, and to any follow up on the issue planned in the ongoing life of the group.

3. It can be helpful to describe the kind of interpersonal exchange that you envision when the members of the group are invited to speak, for example, “talking about personal experiences” or “saying something about how each one understands an experience or situation” or “saying what went well and what didn’t go well” or “gathering information” or “brainstorming” or a more interactive type of conversation.
4. Often it can help also to say what the group is *not* being asked to do at this point in the process, and to indicate when activities for dealing further with the agenda may take place, whether later in the same session or at another time. For example, if the present focus is on what actually happened, or what influenced what happened, it’s “ahead of the process” to bring up ideas about “what needs to be done.”
5. Briefly acknowledge what the group has done to prepare for the session, whether the preparation was done consciously in a planned manner, or informally, or indirectly.
6. If a number of points are being proposed for each individual to address, explain whether a person is expected to speak only once on all the points, or if each point will be addressed by everyone before moving to the next point.
7. If there are a number of issues or aspects of an issue to be covered in the session, also call attention to the sequence in which they will be addressed.
8. Especially if the agenda calls for speaking about personal experience or for individual reports on certain points, explain what the format for speaking will be, whether in random order as each one chooses to speak, or in a certain sequence proposed by the facilitator. It may be helpful to indicate whether each person is expected to speak only once, or to speak occasionally through the session.
9. Regarding the matter of “responding to what has been said, what is appropriate will depend on the nature of the agenda and the activity during the session. There is more on this point in Section G.
10. It may be helpful to mention how the size of the group has a bearing on the distribution of total available “air time” among the number of participants. For example, if there is a half-hour planned for this activity and there are six people in the group, the “average” for each person's contribution would be about five minutes. Mentioning this can serve to encourage some members of the group to be more aware of the need to limit themselves, and other members of the group to see themselves “entitled” to a certain amount of the group's time.
11. Usually it is not appropriate for individuals to take even private notes when others are speaking about their personal experiences. If a record is to be made of any part of the group session, tell the group how this will be done and who will do it. If this will require each one to provide notes of what they contribute, call attention to this expectation. If someone will be taking notes for the group, identify the person. If you as facilitator or someone in the group will be recording lists or notes or statements on newsprint, explain how this medium will be used during the session. Say something about how to ensure that each one's contributions are accurately recorded. Indicate what will be done with the newsprinted material after the session.
12. Inform the group how it will know what has been recorded about its proceedings. This “record keeping” activity should be arranged for *before* the session begins, with clearly communicated expectations about the extent of note-taking, the format of the eventual “record,” and who will prepare the final version.

## F. Clarifying your Role and your Limits as Facilitator

1. Especially if the group is not familiar with you as an facilitator, comment on how you understand your role in light of the group's agenda: what your responsibility is with reference to helping the group engage in its work, use its time together well, and helping individuals communicate in the group.
2. Explain the purpose and method of your interventions, perhaps with an example of what you will say or do when then group or an individual is moving away from the announced focus of the agenda, or when conflicting opinions and feelings are not being productively dealt with, or when a statement seems to require clarification for the benefit of the group's purpose.
3. If your role as an facilitator is different from other roles in which you relate to the group, such as other organizational responsibilities or as a team member, acknowledge that you are moving into another stance in relating to the group and ask the members of the group to help you maintain your stance as an facilitator.
4. If you will be functioning in the session both as an facilitator and as a participant working on the agenda, establish that your primary responsibility and role is as an facilitator, and describe how you will signal to the group when you are speaking as a participant.
5. Acknowledge your limits as an facilitator with respect to the spirit of interactions in the group and to the outcomes of the session. It may be helpful to suggest that the real power to affect the quality of the session and its outcomes resides in the group itself. It is the behavior of individual members and the group as a whole, including verbal behavior, that most directly facilitates or hinders the work of the group.

## G. Presenting Guidelines to the Group and Setting a Tone for the Session

Some remarks by the facilitator on the following points may help set a conducive tone for the session.

1. When a group has not yet established a way of working well together or of interacting with a certain degree of trust, or when the group's agenda is "emotionally changed," there is a need to encourage the group to function in its best manner of interaction. The facilitator can begin by reminding the group of the need for a "manageable increase" in the trust-level of the group, and for respecting one another's different experience and values as they are expressed in the session. Surfacing these differences is part of the process of discovering what is affecting the work of the group, and it is one of the facilitator's tasks to help the group from getting carried away by these differences.
2. It is helpful if members of a group expect to learn something from one another. A good image for group conversation is one of "mutual enrichment," with each member contributing something to a fuller understanding of an issue, beyond what any single individual has come to, and beyond what the group itself has previously come to.
3. Listening is even more important than speaking in a group. There's not much point in speaking if others are not listening and attempting to understand what is being said. Encourage the members of the group to stay attentive to what is being said by each of the others, and to resist the tendency to prepare something to say while another person is speaking. The most important contribution each one makes is as a listener.

4. It is helpful to others in the group if an individual can be clear about how their thoughts, feelings, hopes, concerns, etc. are related to particular events or situations, rather than making generalized statements.
5. If a degree of confidentiality or discretion is expected about what members of the group say, it is important to address this point as you understand it.
6. If statements are being made about personal experiences, feelings, thoughts, hopes, etc., the speaker is “the world's authority” on his or her own experiences and interpretations. Each person has a right to their own interpretation of personal experience. Others in the group should be careful not to try to talk someone out of what the person is experiencing, or to impose a different interpretation on someone's experience, or try to persuade someone out of an opinion or interpretation of a common experience. With regard to personal statements, “should,” “ought,” and “shouldn't” are inappropriate, ineffective, and will backfire.
7. Beware of argumentation masquerading as a question for clarification. When a member of the group has shared a personal experience, it may not be appropriate for others to comment or further investigate. Responding rather than reacting to what a person has shared requires a fair degree of self awareness and inner freedom.
8. Silence can be appropriate in a group, if what has been said merits reflection or respect because of its importance to an individual or to the group.

Unless it is evident that one or more of the following points ought to be talked about at the start of the session, #9 – #12 may better be addressed when needed as the session progresses.

9. Judging and imputing motives blocks openness and cooperation. Healthy group interaction is not an inquisition to determine blame; debate with a win-lose objective also blocks dialogue.
10. Unless information or expertise is sought by the group, individuals should be cautious about taking a “teaching” stance toward other members.
11. Unless the agenda calls for a discussion of theories, individuals should be careful that this line of discussion does not become an avoidance of the focus of conversation on a more personal or more practical level.
12. It is important to realize that there is a complex background of experience in a member of the group as that person speaks about a particular issue, giving the issue a “positive” or “negative” charge for that individual. If the reasons for an individual's “charged language” are unclear, it may be helpful to ask for a clarification from the individual about the experiences that have given the issue such a charged meaning for them. It can also help to invite an individual to identify some of the consequences they anticipate that make the issue a charged one for them.

## H. What to “Be Alert to” and “Attend to” as the Session Progresses

As a session progresses, many things are happening in the members of the group and in the facilitator. These remarks and the ones in following sections provide suggestions about what may need attention.

1. With respect to the agenda, the role of the facilitator is chiefly
  - to evaluate whether the group is clearly focused
  - to remind the group of its format
  - to monitor the pacing of various phases of the agenda
  - to recommend moving on to other points of the agenda
  - or to invite the group to decide to continue to deal with the point under discussion, without expecting to complete what had originally been proposed for further points in its agenda.

At the close of the session, the facilitator should remind the group

- what the next steps appear to be
  - how documentation and reporting will be handled
  - and invite the group to share briefly about its experience of the session, both positive and negative aspects.
2. Pay attention first to what's going on in yourself. What you're experiencing may be a clue to what needs attention in the group – e.g. better clarity about steps in the process or about the way to focus a point in the agenda, or there may be some behavioral dynamics going on in the group that you're picking up. Be aware of your own frustration with particular individuals or with how the session is progressing.
  3. With respect to interpersonal dynamics in the group, the role of facilitator is chiefly to call attention to behavior and statements that appear contrary to the guidelines for the session. (Sections E. and G.)

The person who “has the floor” or is “using the air waves” is in fact focusing and leading the group. If an individual seems to be monopolizing the conversation, a reminder about the time-constraints of the group can help, with an invitation to hear from other members of the group on the point under discussion. Occasionally it will help for the facilitator to reflect back to an individual what they have said, to demonstrate that the person's message has been heard.

When the facilitator decides to speak and focus the group's attention on some aspect of behavior or statement made by an individual, it is important to consider the purpose for intervening, and to be prepared to suggest an alternative approach or focus, without appearing to “put down” or judge the individual's motives.

Sometimes a suitable intervention is simply to acknowledge that the point being made is important to the individual (and perhaps to the group) and then to recall the group to its original focus. In some cases it may be appropriate to invite a moment's reflection before moving on, or if time permits and affectivity is strong, to invite the group to take a brief break and refocus the agenda when the group reconvenes.

## I. Recognizing Some Forms of Resistance

It can be helpful for an facilitator to consider “resistance” – in one individual or in many individuals – as a form of communication and a source of information. The following is a brief outline of some forms of resistance – what it looks like, what it sounds like, how it behaves.

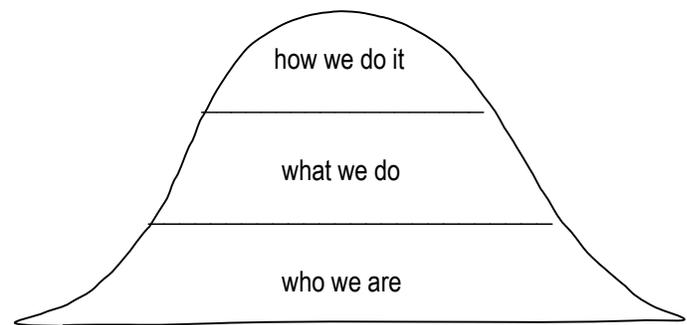
1. Forms of “passive resistance” – silence; avoidance of eye contact; a lack of participation; the tone of a person's voice; defensive body language

2. Forms of “active *undeclared* resistance” – introducing tangents or shifting the focus to another point on the agenda (or not even on the agenda); controlling air time in the group; “generalizing” one’s own resistance, claiming that “the group” has problems with something; raising objections to or questions about process by which the agenda is being handled, when the resistance is really to handling the issue at all when the outcome risks being different than what the individual wants
3. Forms of “active *declared* resistance” – there is a sincere effort to clearly state the problem or the concern, and the person acknowledges their “resistance” without withdrawing from the group process; the focus is on concern or misgivings or even an objection about practical aspects of the process such as time or information, or on the what focus of conversation is trying to bring out, or on the “performance expectations” that seem to be proposed – and these concerns or misgivings or objections are chiefly in relation to the stated purpose of the agenda or the capacities of the group

## J. Recognizing "Levels" of Resistance

One way understand resistance is in relation to the "level" where the actual point of resistance lies. Except in the case “active *declared* resistance, the issue that’s being raised is rarely the one that’s really bothering a person or a group.

It can be useful to consider three basic “levels” of a group’s “agenda” – which are also the “levels” at which resistance occurs.



Three supplementary documents – “The Life–Death–Resurrection Cycle” and “Levels of the Focus in an Evaluation Process” and “An Inventory of Agenda in a Planning Process” – provide more details on these three levels in a group’s life.

An facilitator needs to listen carefully for “what's really being said” in order to recognize what a particular resistance to the group process is actually about.

1. Resistance to **how** the session or a component of the session is organized...  
 The *message* in resistance at this “level” is: “I don't like the way we're doing it.”  
 The issues at this level are with procedures, time-factors, location, style of the facilitator, etc.  
 Beyond what some members of the group may prefer, there may actually be a lack of clarity in the facilitator’s statements, or there may be practical problems in one or more of the following areas:
  - a. the amount of time - too much or too little - being proposed for preparation or for the conversation
  - b. the timing of the preparation or conversation in relation to other activities of individuals or the whole group; this is often an issue of the group’s “energy”
  - c. the location for the session may inconvenient or inappropriate – the seating may be uncomfortable, or there may be problems with noise, lighting, ventilation, traffic patterns; this is sometimes associated with the location’s use for current group activities or memories of previous sessions

- d.  the format for preparation or for conversation is unfamiliar or unclear to members of the group
- the focus suggested for reflection and conversation is vague or too encompassing
- the language, images, methods of reflection may be too complicated or unfamiliar
- the “ground rules” for the session are unclear
- the expectations about preparation and speaking are unclear
- the type or style of the exercise may not be appropriate for this group or for this agenda item
- the tone of preparation or conversation has not been adequately “primed” or maintained
- the wording in the focus points suggests a “yes” or “no” response rather than what is really being asked for

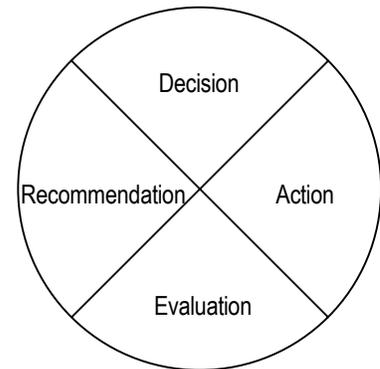
2. Resistance to **what** is being suggested for the focus of the group’s reflection and conversation...

The *message* in resistance at this “level” is: “I don't like what we're talking about.”  
or “I don't understand why we're focusing on this (now).”

At this level of resistance, the issue is about the focus for the agenda. In planning for the session, there may have been misreading of where the group needs to focus, or the group hasn't been given a clear rationale for why the focus is a useful “next-step” for the issue. The following questions can help clarify resistance at this level:

- a. Has there been a misreading of where the group needs to focus in terms of “stages” of an issue in the Life–Death–Resurrection Cycle, as outlined in the more detailed supplementary documents “Levels of the Focus in an Evaluation Process” and “An Inventory of Agenda in a Planning Process”...

- b. Has there been misreading of where the issue needs to be focused in terms of “**The Power Cycle**”... →  
Does the issue need further, collective “Evaluation”  
or is the need for surfacing Options or “Recommendations”  
or is it time for a proposed course of action to be assessed and weighed, so that a Decision can be made. **The Power Cycle** is a way of describing how the focus for an issue needs to carefully follow a sequence: first the steps for “Evaluating” and then the steps for coming up with “Recommendations” or “Options” and then the steps in Decision making. There is often a tendency to jump back and forth between these phases of the process, and an facilitator needs to keep the group focused in the appropriate phase before letting it move into the next phase in this sequence.



- c. Has the focus been tailored to a suit minority in the group (whether the rear guard or the vanguard) rather than to suit where the group collectively needs to focus on the issue...
- d. Is the proposed activity one that is suitable for this group, or it is too “idealistic” a process or one that “other groups use”...
- e. Have the facilitator’s comments “abstracted” from the real life conditions and elements of the issue – by idealizing, romanticizing, exaggerating, minimizing, or theorizing...
- f. Has the facilitator attempted to introduce personal expectations for where the group needs to be going – with an outcome in mind that the group is being “facilitated” to accept as its own...

3. Resistance to engaging at all in the process – resistance to **who we are** if we do this...  
The *message* in resistance at this “level” is: "I can't do this." "It's not what I want." "It's not for me."  
“This isn’t what I believe in.” or “This isn’t the kind of group I want us to be.” or “This isn’t the kind of group I want to be involved in.”

It may be more common to find this level of resistance in only a few members of a group, but this still presents a problem for an facilitator. It is a major problem if the majority of the group or even a significant percentage of the group registers this level of resistance.

This “level” in a group’s life is the level of self-understanding, beliefs, values and commitment.

When there is resistance at this level, the dynamics are pointing to deeper relationship issues in the group or to unresolved assumptions about the nature of the group itself: who we are, what we expect of one another in our group relationships (the norms of group life, performance expectations), status and control issues, or values that seem to be threatened. The agenda of the session is often simply stirring up these underlying issues. The following points may provide a way to reflect on what’s really going on when there is resistance in the group at this level.

- a. Are group members being asked to function beyond their knowledge or wisdom or skills... How many members of the group seem to be in this position...
- b. Is the group being asked to do something it isn’t able to do well or easily – to act beyond its level of confidence, and feeling awkward or insecure... How many individuals seem to be in this position...
- c. Are group members being asked to relate with one another and enter a level of trust beyond their capacity... Is the level of self-disclosure or the degree of intimacy beyond the group’s previous experience, or inappropriate to this group... How many individuals are in this position...
- d. Are group members being asked to relinquish more control than they want to or are capable of... Is the risk proportionate to the gain... Can the group handle the agenda being proposed... Are there control issues in the group that are not being acknowledged and dealt with... Is a control issue with respect to the facilitator an unacknowledged element...

## K. Some Possible Responses to Resistance

How an facilitator deals with resistance in a group will depend in part on the facilitator’s experience and skills and in part on the “level” at which there is resistance and whether there is anything the facilitator can do to address legitimate needs which may not have been planned for this session.

It’s helpful for the facilitator to focus on the signs of resistance as a form of communication and a source of information. The resistance is simply telling you something; it’s important not to react to it or to take it personally – even when it’s focused on you as facilitator.

If the resistance is telling you something about personal issues in the life of an individual or a number of individuals in the group, these issues may not be able to be addressed by the group, or by a better way of working with the stated agenda of the group. These personal issues would include insecurity, residual anger, resentments, lack of self-awareness, inadequate skills or knowledge, prejudices, and “hang ups.”

“Personal issues” often manifest themselves in conflictive interpersonal dynamics – when personalities are clashing or maneuvering for advantage in the group process, or when there are repeated attempts to shift the focus to a different issue, or when there is silence and withdrawal.

Even if you have the skills to do it, unless you are facilitating a “personal growth group” an facilitator is not responsible for helping an individual or a number of group members “work through” their personal issues. You can acknowledge that “there are some deeper issues here” but recommend that the group follow its planned agenda as best it can. Sometimes when tensions are running strong around personal issues it can help if the group takes a short break, and when the group reconvenes the facilitator can restate the focus for the agenda. The individuals who seem to be resisting the process can be invited to join in, at least in the role of listeners, as the group “moves on” with the agenda of the session.

If the resistance is telling you something about how the group is experiencing your effort to facilitate, the first step in dealing with it can be to ask the group for information about what they are finding difficult. This activity can be an occasion or modeling good listening and communication behavior, which itself is an aspect of facilitation. To the degree that it is possible, you can then say what you are able to, or will try to, adjust in your way of facilitating.

If the resistance is giving you feedback on some things you can adjust in the process, you may need to ask the group for a few minutes to work out a revised plan. It can help to work this out with two or three members of the group, while the other members of the group have some “informal time” to talk about the issue at hand or to think about it privately.

If the resistance is telling you that there’s an issue in the life of the group that needs to be addressed before the group can fruitfully work on the currently-focused issue, there are two possible course of action that the facilitator can recommend and test out with the group.

- a. For a number of reasons, it may not be possible to re-focus the agenda of the present session to address this legitimate need. In this case, the group may need to talk about when and how it will plan to address this underlying issue.
- b. If it is possible to re-focus the work of the present session, the general principle for doing this is to move the focus to “a level or two deeper” in terms of the Evaluation or Planning Process outlined in the supplemental documents that were mentioned in Section J.

The following are some general guidelines for interacting with the group when you experience resistance.

1. Listen carefully to the statements being made.
2. Let the speakers know you've heard them – admit their perceptions and judgments. Try to respond in the language and value system of those presenting difficulties or manifesting resistance.
3. Acknowledge that the group is encountering difficulties. Face the resistance not as a personal confrontation but as an exercise of “leadership” on behalf of the group.
4. Try to recognize generalizations, charged words, and “projections” – your own and those of others.

5. Admit the limitations of your own experiences, perceptions, judgments, methods, etc.
6. Contextualize the resistance. Try to situate the experience of resistance as a step in a process that may help bring to light what needs clarification in the group.
7. De-escalate performance expectations. Emphasize that listening is the major contribution of each member, and that engaging in the discussion is a “voluntary” activity.
8. Distinguish the resistance of an individual from resistance more broadly present in the group. Don't let the resistance of one or a few "defocus" or take over the group.
9. Seek some help from the group in clarifying the content of an issue. If another approach is needed, adapt or refocus as well as possible. Or ask the group to cooperate with the "imperfect method" and to rely on their “good sense” in using it.

## L. Bringing the Session to a Close

1. It will be helpful to give the group an “early-warning” about when the session is scheduled to end.
2. To help the group get closure on the “status of the work” it did in the session, the facilitator can briefly review what was covered and invite the group to “review what has been accomplished.”
3. If it hasn't already been addressed, some time should be taken to focus on what the “next steps” will be to follow up on the issue(s) addressed in the session: who will be doing what, on what timetable... including any record or minutes or report that is expected to come out of the session. This point applies to each of the activities in a session where a number of agenda items have been dealt with.
4. The schedule should provide enough time for members of the group to comment on what they have found helpful and what has not been helpful in the process, for themselves personally. These comments may lead to clarities about what the group has learned about how to work with its issues.
5. Some measure of interpersonal closure can also be helpful. The facilitator can invite the group to make observations about how the experience with one another has gone: the manner in which group members were listening and interacting; and the spirit and energy level of the group, which may have varied during the session.
6. As facilitator, you also can make some observations about your experience of group: the abilities and learnings of the group that were evident to you during the session, the quality of the group's work, your sense of the group's interpersonal dynamics, and your experience of working with the group.
7. The facilitator's final activity is to return the leadership of the group to the person who is its “formal leader.”