

Running Meetings

Public-participation planning projects will require some level of event facilitation by one or more people depending upon the type of meeting and activities. It is important to seek out facilitators who are engaging. Will the facilitator or co-facilitators be able to relate to the demographic, linguistic and cultural characteristics of the participants? Is there an opportunity to involve a well-known speaker who can attract a higher turnout and inspire robust participation?

Another important and too-often overlooked step to ensure meaningful and productive participation is developing a strategically designed, well-crafted process agenda in advance that identifies the event's purpose and objectives, and the steps during the event to meet those goals.

The use of a facilitator who doesn't have a direct stake in the outcome can help different groups resolve complex issues.

A facilitated process can be sponsored by an agency or organization to resolve a complicated, multi-party conflict, such as a project in an environmentally sensitive area.

A facilitator can fill various roles, based on the reasons stakeholders have been brought together. At a minimum, a facilitator is a neutral and trusted person who ensures that discussions are respectful, organized and productive. The facilitator uses meeting management techniques to help guide the discussions and ensure that all participants have an equal and secure opportunity to communicate their perspectives.

In addition to the task of managing a meeting, an appropriately trained and experienced facilitator can also take a more



advanced role of helping participants discuss and resolve problems through collaborative, interest-based methods.

In a facilitated group process, community stakeholders — and often city/county staff — participate in an effort to find a mutually acceptable solution, or identify common needs, goals and opportunities. A diversity of community viewpoints is sought to ensure a full airing of all relevant issues. In community planning, facilitated processes have been used successfully to resolve tough land-use decisions, and helped define mutually acceptable solutions to previously gridlocked situations.

Facilitation invites or identifies someone seen as fair by all the parties to help the group engage in constructive problem-solving. The facilitator can be a consultant, an elected official, a staff member, or even a member of the participating group, as long as the individual has facilitation skills and the group's trust. The facilitator guides the process and helps the group move toward agreement.

Facilitators use a variety of meeting management techniques:

- ▶ Help develop and adhere to ground rules to keep communication focused and productive in achieving the meeting and group objectives.
- ▶ Monitor group progress and timekeeping.
- ▶ Focus on the needs and aspirations of participants, and steer them from personal positions and feelings about topics and/or others in the group.
- ▶ Ensure everybody has the opportunity to speak.
- ▶ Ensure that all concerns are fully addressed.
- ▶ Identify themes and areas of agreement and disagreement.
- ▶ Guide the group's brainstorming activities.
- ▶ Record the group's discussion.
- ▶ Encourage collaboration.

Success in a facilitated process is usually attained when:

- ▶ There is a broad participation by all parties with a major interest in the issue.
- ▶ Each participant helps define the problem, as well as opportunities and assets.
- ▶ All participants share responsibility for educating one another about their perceptions and concerns about the situation.
- ▶ A full range of alternatives are considered.
- ▶ Participants share responsibility for developing solutions and implementation strategies.

Facilitated processes bring together a range of stakeholders to find common ground, design feasible solutions, and work together to identify common visions and opportunities — and define and solve problems. Unlike many conventional decision-making patterns that foster rivalry between different groups, facilitation is used to resolve conflict and save valuable time and energy by acknowledging the validity of each party's concerns. It allows participants to reach a solution that — while not always the first choice of each party involved — can nevertheless be agreed to by all involved. These solutions are usually more durable than the first choices of each party because the solutions reflect the interests of all parties involved.

Interest-based negotiation is a problem-solving method that can inform effective facilitation. This process of negotiation to solve problems aims at satisfying mutual needs, rather than one party's positions at the expense of other needs. It focuses on needs and issues to be resolved, rather than positions or personalities, and looks for win-win solutions.

The book "Getting to Yes" is a classic primer on interest-based negotiation, and is recommended reading for anyone attempting facilitation at any level.

Guides such as "The Facilitator's Fieldbook" and "The Skilled Facilitator" provide comprehensive references to methods and techniques to support facilitation efforts.

Another tool that can inform effective facilitation is Nonviolent Communication, which is based on nonviolent principles that can be effective in addressing controversial issues without

judgment or blame. Like interest-based negotiation, it approaches deliberation in terms of needs. Nonviolent Communication is a particularly effective tool in interest-based negotiation.

For More Information

- ▶ Common Ground Center for Cooperative Solutions: extension.ucdavis.edu/commonground
- ▶ The Center for Collaborative Policy: csus.edu/ccp
- ▶ International Association of Facilitators: iaf-world.org
- ▶ International Association for Public Participation: iap2.org
- ▶ The Institute of Cultural Affairs: ica-usa.org
- ▶ Justice, Thomas, and David W. Jamieson, Ph.D. "The Facilitator's Fieldbook." New York, NY: AMACOM Books, 2012.
- ▶ Schwartz, Roger. "The Skilled Facilitator." San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002.
- ▶ Fisher, Roger and William Ury. "Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement."
- ▶ "Without Giving In." New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1991.
- ▶ The Center for Nonviolent Communication: cnvc.org
- ▶ Rosenberg, Marshall. "Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life." San Diego, CA: Puddledancer Press, 2003.

