

"The Facilitator"

A Communications Therapist

Conrad A. Reinhardt

It takes more than a well organized presentation, lesson alone, or program content to motivate a group.

However, we feel it can be done effectively if the audience is asked to interact with the subject matter being taught, sort out opinion from fact and evaluate their own point of view in the process.

Here is where the role of "facilitator" is important. It requires asking the kind of questions that will involve an audience in the discussion. It means assuming a nonjudgmental frame of mind. Above all it asks that members of the group be given equal consideration and opportunity to express different points of view.

This supplement includes those basic concepts and types of questions a person can use to facilitate groups. However, it is only a supplement.

The real prescription for success is to watch someone facilitate a group who is good at it. Then practice the technique and have them join in evaluating your efforts.



Conrad Reinhardt is associate professor of visual communication in the Institute of Agriculture at the University of Tennessee. He has been visuals and television specialist there for the past 10 years. Before joining the Tennessee staff he taught junior and senior high school art in Madison, Wisconsin. Conrad is a native of Wisconsin, with BS and MS degrees in art education at the University of Wisconsin.

He has been active in AAACE, especially in the area of visual communications. He served as chairman of the AAACE Visual Aids Technical Committee in 1970-71-72, and again in 1974. He helped plan the 4-H Communications Training Workshop held at the National 4-H Center in Washington, D.C. in the fall of 1972, where he introduced many of us to his concept of "Facilitating" as a technique for improving interaction and response in group learning situations.

He has since made presentations on this technique at workshops for the Rhode Island Extension Staff and at the National Meeting of Home Economists in Knoxville. Conrad was official slide set photographer for National 4-H Congress in Chicago in 1973-74 and '75.

The crowd gathering for the meeting appears relaxed. The guest speaker, who has already arrived is setting up the slide projector. There is a feeling of anticipation in the air. Another dull program? Not this time, for today's speaker is a "facilitator." His program goals are different. He is less concerned with directing and controlling the group than he is with group interaction. His preliminary plan includes knowing the size of the audience, the medium he chose for visualizing his ideas, and the technique he will use to involve and motivate them. What the facilitator does to get verbal feedback depends on the skillful use of the following guidelines for group involvement.

Because there is no prescription for success, a facilitator will insist his preliminary plan of action provides opportunity to interact with the audience. One way this can be accomplished is to place the chairs in the meeting room in a semi-circle facing the projection screen. Here too, adding several aisles makes it possible for the presenter to move freely through and around the group while talking. In addition, removal of the speaker's podium leaves the choice of where to stand and start the program up to the speaker.

Before being introduced he makes a last minute check of the equipment followed with a visual survey of the audience to tune in on their apparent attitudes or feelings.

From this observation he selects to start the program while being seated, thus breaking with traditional approaches and emphasizing that the front of the room may not always be the most effective place to begin a program.

Following the introduction the speaker explains to the audience some of the desirable goals of this presentation without drawing any conclusions about the subject he will cover.

He does this by greeting the group in an informal way and conveying a warm open feeling in his manner of speech. He then tells them what they are about to see, explaining there are several points of view expressed in the slide program. He suggests they tune in on their feelings while they watch the slide show, and after it is over, report to the group what they have just experienced.

What was to follow proved to be a unique experience because of the way the slide program "Buried Sunshine" involved the audience. There was no narrator, only a series of pictured vignettes showing many of the by-products made from coal that we use in our everyday lives. It also featured two on-location interviews, one with an owner / operator of a coal mine; the other with a geologist who describes the effects of "mass wasting," while visiting a strip mine. The program closed with a song whose lyrics ask the question "What would we do without coal?"

"Buried Sunshine" was the right show for our facilitator to use because it presented a lot of facts without directing the audience to draw any one particular conclusion. It could be said that "Buried Sunshine" is a happen-

ing. Like first-rate drama, it placed the audience in the role of the participators in what was going on.

When the program is over, all the facilitator does to draw upon this unique experience is ask an open-ended question! What did you just experience? How do you feel about it? Pausing, he waits for a response, urging them to speak out. Because it was slow in coming, he continues to scan the group with his eyes, urging them to talk about what they had just seen. Through skillful use of body language and well-directed questions, the discussion begins.

What happens thereafter to facilitate group interaction depends in part on the successful use of the following questions—questions designed by qualified experts to help foster acceptance and clarification of different points of view.

OPEN QUESTION

Objectives:

1. *To elicit a universe of facts, concepts, and ideas upon which to operate.*
2. *To provide an opportunity for each member of the group to become initially involved in the discussion.*

Here a presenter will ask an open question that summons a recall or reading of data from the field of information being interpreted (What did you feel about your experience? What happened in the story? What did you see in the film?)

In his use of the open question, the facilitator makes a point to accept all responses in a nonjudgmental manner. He supports members of the group by encouraging them to become involved and express their ideas. To do this, he may make such statements as, "Take a minute to think, go ahead . . . express it any way that you can." He avoids editorializing and gives non-verbal support. He doesn't rush the response. In mapping out his course of action he tries to gain as much information as possible. Here he might ask, "Are there any points that we have missed?"

FOCUSING QUESTION

Objectives:

To focus on specific points to be compared, contrasted, and related to other points.

Here the presenter asks a question or a series of questions which focus on specific data.

"What do you feel the slide presentation had to tell us about strip mining?" "What opinion did the owner / operator of the coal mine express?" "What happened to you when you were asked to play the role of bulldozer operator?"

Here the basic skill of the facilitator is to ask a participant to give evidence on the basis of a personal response. Questions directed toward this end might be, "When you say the geologist was angry, what were some of the things he said or did in the story that made you feel this way?" "What facts did you discover that led you to believe that strip mining is a complex problem?"

INTERVENTIVE QUESTIONS

Objectives:

To elicit comparing, contrasting, and relating of specific points within the field of data.

Here the presenter will ask a series of questions calling for the members of the group to draw a relationship between two or more points in the data ("How did the coal operator and geologist feel that was different from how others in the group felt?" "What differences do you notice between the two opinions?" "Between yours and theirs?")

Here again, the need exists to ask members of the group to support their response. For example, "How would you account for the differences you stated?"

Quite often, when an interpretive question is asked, the answer will be of a general nature. The main discussion skill is again substantiating.

Example:

P-"What relationship do you see between the industries of this area and the use of natural resources?"

A-"Industry depends on natural resources."

P-"What information do you see that supports the statement that industry depends on natural resources?"

CAPSTAN QUESTION

Objectives:

To move the discussion to the verbalization of high level abstractions.

Here the facilitator will ask for a question which calls for a conclusion, a summary, inference, generalizations ("What conclusions would you draw from our discussion?" "How would you summarize what we have talked about?")

The basic discussion skill is asking for proof, particularly in the case where someone has over-generalized. "Would that be true under all circumstances?" In addition to those questions already covered, there are others that will help *focus* attention on accepting and clarifying ideas expressed by members of the discussion group.

QUESTIONS FOR ACCEPTING AND CLARIFYING

14 Kinds of Clarifying Techniques for Helping Professionals

Helping Professionals Dr. Giammatteo*

- 1. Clarifying purpose:**
What is your goal in using this approach? What are you after? Why are you doing it?
- 2. Clarifying definitions:**
What do you mean when you say that . . .? What would be some examples of your idea?
- 3. Clarifying the sources of ideas:**
What groups or authorities agree with you? Where were these ideas started? Where could we get data to support your ideas? Is that based on personal experience or on data or both?
- 4. Extending personal views:**
Could we hear more? How might we find out more about your views? How can we help you build on your ideas? Do you have other reasons for saying that? What would be examples of your idea?
- 5. Clarifying how long the person has held an idea:**
Is this a current belief you hold? Have you been feeling this way long? Do you feel you will always think that?
- 6. Clarifying crucial factors:**
Which event was most significant in causing you to feel this way? What incident aided you most in forming your point of view?
- 7. Pointing out inconsistencies:**
Is this consistent with other points of view expressed by you?
- 8. Questioning usefulness:**
Would it be beneficial for us? Could we make that idea work for our group? Is that something you (value) (like) (need)? What are some bad things about the idea?
- 9. Considering consequences:**
If we were to use your idea, what might we anticipate? Would your implemented idea create a better situation? Where will your idea take us?
- 10. Clarifying the strength of an idea:**
How sure are you, could any other points of view be valid?
- 11. Considering alternatives:**
What other choices might the group make? Was this your only choice? What other possibilities are there?
- 12. Pointing out similarities and dissimilarities of ideas:**
In what ways is that similar to Bill's point of view? Where do you and Bill differ?
- 13. Summarizing:**
Can one of you recall the facts we discussed?
- 14. Opportunity for insight and evaluation:**
If given the opportunity, what might you have done differently? How did you feel while you were doing that? Would you do the same thing over again? What would you change?

*Giammatteo, Mike; Investigating Your Environment Series
U.S. Forest Service; Portland, Oregon, 1975

In addition to the skillful use of questions, there are a number of other factors that make for a good “facilitator.” Remaining nonjudgmental is number one. Listening attentively, and reading back to the group what he has heard helps focus attention on the discussion. Responding openly to the feeling of the group. Helping to identify their needs as they evolve. Treating humor as a cover for the expression of somewhat unpopular personal ideas and feelings. Treating counter questions as opinion or the desire to express the same. At this point he might say, “I feel you don’t quite agree with what is being said. Would you explain how you feel about it?” Here again he refrains from criticizing a member of the group, letting them feel important and needed by making sure they have a chance to be heard. Giving an opinion is acceptable as long as it is stated, “This is my opinion.”

What then are the results of the facilitator’s efforts? Can they be measured? Because no two groups will respond in the same way, the answers to these questions are found in evaluating the response of the facilitator to the group and the group to the facilitator.

A demonstration will show how this relationship works. At the same time it will dramatize how effective “facilitating” can be as a means of good communication. Just ask any facilitator and he will let *you* show yourself how you can facilitate any size discussion group.