

Chapter 7. Facilitation Skills in VISION

Following the previous chapters—in which we described the process of identifying a value, preparing the process and analysing the context and target group, and the overview of a VISION process from beginning to end—in this chapter, we outline basic information related to facilitation techniques. This includes how to develop your facilitation skills, navigating neutrality and leadership, and noticing power structures and adjusting facilitation to them. Here, we continue to introduce strategies for guiding discussions back to a more abstract level given that participants often need some assistance in such dialogues. We also provide examples regarding how to consistently ensure all participants feel included, recognising that, within any group, some individuals will be more and less vocal. The key element of a VISION process is to foster mutual learning amongst all participants. We close this chapter with step-by-step instructions for a group-based VISION process, which also appears as a cut-out in Appendix C.

VISION is meant to serve as a supplemental method for social workers who already have access to and training in communicating with individuals as well as in facilitating group practices and community organising. As we explained in Chapter 3, VISION must also be used cautiously, particularly when working with highly diverse groups and when engaging in advocacy. With this in mind, we have also provided a list of resources for those needing a more thorough introduction to facilitation techniques at the end of this chapter, which includes resources related to group-based social work, community organising, and advocacy. Within these diverse frameworks, social workers function as facilitators, wielding varying degrees of formal leadership in their efforts to sculpt group dynamics, foster dialogue, and cultivate supportive environments.

The role of the facilitator within VISION

The role and mindset of the facilitator in a VISION dialogue are essential to its effectiveness. Given that protreptic explorations can significantly influence an individual's worldview, it is imperative that this method is employed carefully and with a keen ethical awareness of one's own role and biases. In advocacy contexts in particular, where various power dynamics remain at play, the facilitator often holds the most influential position in the room. Notably, the facilitator possesses the ability to guide the process ethically and inclusively, ensuring that all participants are heard whilst consistently emphasising confidentiality and a focus on the common good. As such, it is essential that the facilitator recognises their power and responsibility in this role, clarifying their own core values and ethical principles to engage meaningfully with participants and identify what is significant to them. This engagement can take a range of forms, including when the facilitator actively participates—not simply facilitates—in protreptic dialogues themselves. In advocacy settings involving larger groups, the inclusion of a co-facilitator may also prove beneficial, given that they can summarise the process and assist during subsequent steps, as we described in Chapter 3.

Developing facilitation skills

As a facilitator of group and community processes, facilitation refers to assisting the group to achieve their purpose, enabling the process of connecting to each other for the sake of the common good. Similar to other kinds of communication, facilitation skills and tools can be studied and learnt, whilst other elements resemble an artform (Axner, n.d.). As such, no single way of facilitating exists. It is also important to find your own voice and style, to feel secure and

comfortable with what you are doing, allowing you to remain present and able to sense what is going on within the group.

For individuals new to facilitation, we recommend reading about the subject and observing experienced facilitators prior to undertaking the role yourself. In addition, a valuable approach to becoming comfortable as a facilitator is to recognise transferable skills from various spheres of life which may enhance facilitation efforts. Experience gained from volunteer work, serving in the hospitality industry, caring for children in educational settings, or participating in group projects during academic pursuits may all serve as beneficial experiences, particularly when reflecting on the elements contributing to success. Consider what factors in these activities fostered effective group dynamics and what elements may have hindered them. More formally, those competencies required for facilitating a process can be informed by experiences such as chairing meetings, teaching, performance arts, therapeutic practices, or providing supportive environments in spiritual contexts. As Kirkeby (2016) explains, a protreptic dialogue closely resembles the process of creating music with others. For this reason, conducting an orchestra also offers a solid example of the role of a facilitator within a VISION process—that is, creating space for resonance, connecting people to one another in a group, making the space safer for a group, and engendering both autonomy and care amongst and between participants. The reflective processes in VISION can also be used by facilitators to nurture facilitation skills themselves, examining values such as leadership, power, listening, voice, agency, humility, or service.

Facilitator neutrality and leadership

A good, open-source resource for learning basic skills in facilitation can be found in the *Community Tool Box (CTB)*, from Kansas City University (n.d.). In their section on facilitation, they point out three basic principles in facilitation:

- *A facilitator is a guide helping people to move through a process together, not serving as the seat of wisdom and knowledge. That means that a facilitator is not there to give their opinions, but to draw out the opinions and ideas of members of the group.*
- *Facilitation focuses on how people participate in the process of learning or planning, not simply on what is achieved.*
- *A facilitator is expected to remain neutral with regard to content and outcomes, structuring and supporting the process without taking sides in participants' positions.* (Axner, n.d., Chapter 16, section 2)

However, as a facilitator, it is impossible to remain completely neutral. Our reactions are visible from our facial expressions, body language, speech, voice intonation, tone of voice, and movements. Therefore, we recommend developing a shared understanding within the group concerning your role in facilitating the process, emphasising your ideal of neutrality specifically regarding the *content*. Simultaneously, the facilitator should acknowledge their role as leading the *process* for the benefit of the group. To do so, it is important to remain aware of the body language within the group and always check back with the group when sharing your own ideas and thoughts (Axner, n.d.). This also requires accessing as well as using your senses and intuition, remaining aware of both what is and is not said. Wisdom can be found employing these skills through the practice of 'holding space', the roots of which lie in holistic traditions. As Heather Plett (2020) explains, holding space refers to being present, compassionate, and supportive of someone without trying to fix or change them or their circumstances. Furthermore, doing is described as highly related to simply being a human, whereby facilitation represents a dynamic

skill requiring practice and presence, and which changes over time—just as we do as individuals throughout our lives.

Facilitation, language, and power

VISION is designed to facilitate interactions amongst individuals from diverse backgrounds and with varying power dynamics, fostering a neutral and shared environment. This approach emphasises core values, encouraging participants to recognise one another as human beings rather than merely as representatives of their respective functions or societal roles. When facilitating such diverse groups, it is important to remain aware of the dynamics of power and language. Language is loaded with power dynamics, influencing the ways in which individuals and groups establish social hierarchies and maintain systems of dominance (Riaz, 2023). Institutional power, such as in legal and educational systems, is often maintained through language, where biased language practices and regulations can marginalise certain groups. However, language can also serve as a catalyst for positive change by raising awareness of these power dynamics, giving marginalised voices a platform, and creating more inclusive, equitable societies, which is also the purpose of VISION. Language can both reinforce power—by upholding social hierarchies, specifically through gender, ethnicity, and class distinctions—as well as challenge power. According to Bourdieu (1991), language serves as a form of symbolic power, reproducing and symbolising social hierarchies. We observe the latter in initiatives focused on revitalising languages and giving space to alternative linguistic practices such as augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) techniques and nonverbal communication through creativity (Light & McNaughton, 2014; United Nations Education, Social, and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2019).

Furthermore, as a facilitator, you must be aware of and plan for how to create an inclusive space for group members with varying language skills. This can be accomplished by using creative methods such as art, clay, dance, and music to represent ideas, feelings, and value-laden topics a participant does not have the vocabulary to describe. Such techniques may also be useful if a participant has difficulties with verbal-language expression. The value catalogue (see Chapter 9) in VISION includes suggestions for such activities, where some of the values are supplied alongside suggestions for alternative exercises and creative activities to supplement or even replace verbal dialogue.

Dealing with disruptions

CTB (Axner, n.d.) offers some advice on how to deal with disruptions. Some measures prevent disruptions, including agreeing on the agenda, defining the ground rules and outcomes, listening carefully, showing respect for alternative experiences, and identifying the group's expectations. In addition, it is important to remain in the facilitator role, attempting to avoid defensiveness by taking a 'mental step' back before responding when criticised. If a disruption occurs, it may help to revisit the ground rules and agenda, honestly view what is happening, and allow the group to decide upon the next step. It may also help to take a break to subsequently find a way back to common ground (Axner, n.d.). Some of these techniques draw from methods in conflict resolution such as mediation. Additional information related to these topics and techniques can be found in Folger et al.'s (2011) work on conflict resolution.

Redirections and inclusive strategies

Facilitators must always use their intuition to determine when to pause and which questions to ask from the three spheres, employing the example questions outlined in Chapter 6. Best practice involves aiming for a rather abstract dialogue which includes all participants, along with avoiding psychologising and sticking to habitual thought patterns, which frequently impede new insights from emerging. Often, participants will return to familiar territories, offering examples or conflicts from their personal stories. This is natural, particularly given that there are no wrong answers; however, to elicit new perspectives and openings for the development of ideas, facilitators should attempt to gently guide the dialogue back towards a more objective and neutral sphere, without singling out anyone.

To redirect conversations, facilitators may use the following:

- How can these feelings, experiences, and thoughts represent something general in human life?
- To view it from a slightly broader perspective, what could be the most essential element of the value or concept?
- How would this be understood if we were to view it from a more general perspective?

To invite all participants to take part in a dialogue, facilitators may use the following prompts:

- I would like to invite anyone who has additional insights on this theme to share their thoughts on the discussion thus far.
- The aim of this dialogue is to collaboratively explore various viewpoints, and I encourage others to contribute their insights.
- Because this dialogue is intended to create a space for learning from one another, there are no right or wrong answers. I welcome any of you to provide new/other perspectives.
- To enhance our understanding of this value, I would like you to discuss the following question in pairs.

Step-by-step instructions for a group-based VISION process

The structure below summarises the facilitation guidelines we have outlined in this chapter and can be used as step-by-step instructions when facilitating a group-based VISION process. We recommend using the preparation checklist in Chapter 5 to analyse and assess the needs of the target group and then adjust the steps that follow according to the direction the group takes.

- Begin with a short welcome and an introduction to the method, your role, and the theme (such as sustainable cities) upon which the process will focus. Provide an answer to the question ‘why are we here?’. Some examples might include ‘We’re here today to share ideas around values. These values can be personal values or other values important to you as a participant. In this session, we will use sustainable cities [or whatever you choose] as the overall theme in our discussions.’
- If group participants are not familiar with one other, consider beginning the group with a short round of introductions or an icebreaker, which can take place in pairs if the group is large group and time is short.

- Help the group establish its own ground rules. Some examples include the following:
 - Treat others with respect.
 - Do no argue—remain curious about others’ ideas or opinions.
 - Do not interrupt one another.
 - Respect the group’s time (allow others to respond).
 - Consider all comments or thoughts with curiosity rather than judgement.
 - Do not be defensive if someone disagrees with you.
 - Focus on looking for reflection rather than a concrete conclusion. Often things will fall into place later in the day or in the days and weeks that follow.
 - Remember that this space we are creating is confidential in order to allow everyone to reflect freely and openly.
- If the value is stated by the facilitator, present it with an argument regarding why this value was selected. (If you are working with subjects related to sustainability, see Chapter 4 for suggested related values.)
- If your preparation suggests that it is more appropriate for the group to decide upon a value together, follow these steps:
 - Open the group discussion by inviting participants to share what values come to mind when thinking about a topic.
 - Keep track of the values mentioned somewhere so that the group can see them.
 - Summarise and clarify important ideas and values that arise during the discussion. Often, more values will be mentioned; the role is then to help the group to choose between them.
- Use selected questions from the speaking card and/or exercises from the value catalogue to prompt reflections about the value through the three spheres. Redirect participants to the abstract level when needed and ensure that all participants are invited to the dialogue without forcing them to speak.
- End the session by gently summarising the process and offering space for debriefing. Debriefing in VISION is understood as a shared moment of attunement, where participants are invited to briefly reflect on their experience of reflecting together, through open questions such as ‘How was it to reflect together in this way?’ or ‘What stays with you from the dialogue?’ An easy and supportive closing sentence might be: ‘This seems like a good place to stop.’ The purpose of the debriefing is not to draw conclusions, evaluate outcomes, or assess the facilitator or the process. Rather, it serves to acknowledge what has taken place, to allow impressions and insights to settle, and to support a sense of closure without finality. In this way, the dialogue remains open and alive beyond the session, and the process ends on a respectful, grounded, and positive note.

This chapter was about...

We focused on how facilitation skills are used in VISION:

- We position facilitation as a central, ethically charged component of the VISION method. Building on earlier chapters, we position facilitation not merely as a technical skill but as a relational and ethical practice significantly shaping how VISION dialogues unfold. Because protreptic explorations can influence participants' worldviews, facilitators are called to act with care, self-awareness, and responsibility, particularly in advocacy contexts where power dynamics are present and unequal.
- The facilitator's role balances leadership, neutrality, and ethical awareness. Here, we stress that facilitators inevitably hold influence within a VISION process and must, therefore, remain conscious of their power, biases, and values. Whilst striving for neutrality with regards to the content, facilitators are also responsible for leading the process, holding space, safeguarding confidentiality, and ensuring that dialogue remains focused on the common good rather than individual agendas.
- Facilitation skills are both learnable and deeply personal. As such, facilitation is described as a practice which combines acquired tools and techniques with intuition, presence, and personal style. Thus, we encourage facilitators to find their own voice, draw on transferable life experiences, and view facilitation as an evolving practice rooted in listening, resonance, and care.
- Language, power, and inclusion require deliberate attention throughout the process. As such, VISION is designed to create shared spaces across difference. Yet we emphasise in this chapter that language itself carries power and can either marginalise or include others. Facilitators are thus encouraged to remain attentive to linguistic hierarchies, different communicative abilities, and unspoken dynamics, and to use creative and nonverbal methods when needed to ensure that all participants can meaningfully contribute.
- Effective facilitation involves redirection, responsiveness, and an open and reflective tone. We highlight in this chapter the importance of gently guiding dialogue back to an abstract, shared level when discussions become overly personal or fixed, whilst avoiding psychologising and judgement. We also stress strategies for handling disruptions, inviting quieter voices into the dialogue, and recognising when reflection has reached a natural pause—ending not with conclusions, but with openness, shared insight, and the possibility of continued reflection beyond the session.

Chapter 7 references

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