



Facilitated Conversations: A Guide for Hosts

Kris Bein, with contributions from

Cat Fribley, Tracy Wright, Michelle Dixon-Wall, and Norio Umezu Hall

There are many different kinds of learning that coalitions provide their member programs and allied professionals. Some learning about issues related to sexual violence is best done in a facilitated conversation. A facilitated conversation is simply a discussion on a specific topic that is intentionally guided by a facilitator(s). A facilitated conversation can also be thought of as “the practice of being open to multiple possibilities, anticipating impact and consequences, and making timely choices” ([Norma Wong](#)). The RSP values facilitated conversations for two main reasons. First, there are no easy solutions to sexual violence, and therefore few topics on which we can provide straightforward training. Everyone in this field must pool our collective knowledge and creativity to generate solutions together. Second, this work is rooted in empowerment and collaboration. When coalitions host a conversation where advocates can share as peers and their wisdom is valued, coalitions are modeling trauma-informed care. In this brief, the RSP thought we would share some of our thinking on facilitation, as well as the books, people, and organizations that have influenced how the RSP thinks about facilitation.

Shaping the Context for Conversation

Facilitated conversations can be used to move thinking forward on a topic, help a group coalesce around a particular perspective, understand the range of perspectives, build relationships amongst people working on similar topics, resolve a contradiction, and understand a problem better, among other things. They’re not the right choice for providing concrete, specific information, but they are a great choice when there are multiple perspectives or new possibilities to explore.

Facilitated conversations need thoughtful preparation to support meaningful exchange between participants. Shaping the context of a conversation comprises:

- Identifying the purpose and goals of the conversation
- articulating the factors that will shape the conversation
- transparency about the values and approaches the facilitator brings

Facilitated conversations always have their own power dynamics, and often occur within other power dynamics between participants. The facilitator's role has inherent power because part of the responsibility is to shape conversation and help it flow; someone is making decisions about things that impact the whole group. Advocates mitigate power differentials with survivors by transparently explaining their role, the boundaries of the relationship, and how the survivor can practice choice and control in the relationship. Similarly, trauma-informed facilitators create a more equitable and trusting relationship by explaining their role and boundaries, as well as participants' choice and controls in the dialogue. A facilitated conversation, at its best, allows people to listen generously to one another, connect our humanity, and speak without fear or shame. Listening and connection, on any scale, is the basis of our shared liberation (brown, [Emergent Strategy](#), 2017) and anti-oppression efforts. "The more we build community and connection, the greater power we will have to engage in collective action" ([Simmons](#)).

Facilitation is a chance to put [values into action](#). The values that the RSP uses in facilitation have been developed out of our shared history, experiences, and culture. In all our work, we try to be guided by values on: anti-oppression, empowerment, survivor-centeredness, collaboration, flexibility, and working from strengths. We also try to bring honesty to all our communication: "caring personally while challenging directly...kind and clear, specific and sincere" ([Scott](#), 2017). All too often, people use niceness to avoid discomfort or confrontation, thereby preventing the group from deeper growth and learning. Practicing radical candor, especially to confront oppressive remarks, supports true and open connection for the group.

What are your coalition's values? How do they or how could they show up in a facilitated conversation?

What are the ways you can practice radical candor as a facilitator? What will support you in doing so?

Shaping a dialogue depends not only on the values we bring, but also the way the we approach thinking and communication. “Everyone thinks; it is our nature to do so. But much of our thinking, left to itself, is biased, distorted, partial, uninformed or down-right prejudiced...A well cultivated critical thinker: raises vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely; gathers and assesses relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively comes to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards; thinks open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences; and communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems” ([Foundation for Critical Thinking](#)).

Doing some research and contemplation about values, learning styles, communication, community-building, and thinking itself will help facilitators ground themselves and the group. Some of RSP's favorite resources on shaping a dialogue are:

[A More Beautiful Question](#) (2014) by Warren Berger

[Emergent Strategy](#) (2017) by adrienne maree brown

[Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making](#) (2014) by Sam Kaner

[Crucial Conversations](#) (2011) by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler

[Radical Candor](#) (2017) by Kim Scott

[The Fifth Discipline](#) (2006) by Peter Senge

[Love WITH Accountability](#) (2019) by Aishah Shahidah Simmons

[Strategic Thinking](#) (2016) by Norma Wong and *Move to End Violence*

Facilitating the Conversation

Facilitation should be nimble, yet always in keeping with the purpose of the gathering. The activities used and specific questions will change based on the evolving interests and needs of the group. Every group will have its own personality, made up of all the unique individuals participating. Nimble facilitation can be achieved by clearly articulating the goals or main questions of the meeting, and then matching facilitation techniques to each. The techniques can be changed throughout the meeting without too much stress as long as you know the goals for the dialogue. Some people find it easier to start with goal statements and then generate discussion questions, while others tend to think in questions. Start with what feels most comfortable to you, and then develop into a format that will serve the group.

The worksheets at the end of this publication can help you create objectives and questions for your next facilitated conversation. Starting with the *Aspects of Dialogue* (p.8-9), work through the purpose, context, and other areas to make a well-rounded list of discussion questions. Review the questions and concepts you generated. Your list might easily become your agenda, or you might like to refine and revise it further. Don't worry about activities yet—those are coming soon. Are you having trouble coming up with questions? That's okay! It can be hard to get started on those. [Appreciative Inquiry](#), [Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy](#), and [The Art of Powerful Questions](#) have some great sample questions and ideas to inspire you.

Next, work on *Meeting Considerations* (p. 10) to help you think about the attendees and meeting logistics. When you have a clear idea of the concepts you want to explore and who will attend, it's time to look at a variety of conversation tools. Different people need different ways to process their thoughts and express them: some do well in large group dialogue, others prefer journaling. In a longer facilitated conversation, it is also helpful to vary the techniques to keep participants interested and energized. People will tune out after a few hours of small group work, but moving from small groups to large groups to interviews and back in those same few hours will help them stay involved. With all techniques and activities, it is centrally important that the facilitator practice active listening.

Sometimes, the mood of the group or the content calls for a different technique than perhaps you had planned. The facilitator's role here is to observe the mood of the group and adjust activities accordingly. This adjustment can be to accommodate the mood or to disrupt it. As an example of accommodation, Michelle Dixon-Wall remembers "one meeting where nobody would participate in the large group discussion we had planned. It was painfully silent. But when we switched to small groups, every single person was actively engaged. We didn't know why, but that's okay. We simply moved people into different small groups for different questions for the rest of the day." Disruption is helpful when participants seem stuck or disengaged. In this case, a facilitator might try a more active technique like a gallery walk, a more introspective technique like journaling, or direct communication about the process and the disengagement.

Facilitation over the phone or internet is different from in-person work, because "our habitual ways of communicating and interacting fall short when we meet virtually. When we take collaboration online we are forced to reflect upon and become more aware and deliberate about how we interact, communicate and collaborate" ([Liberating Structures, 2018](#)). The preparatory work of shaping a dialogue and developing questions or topics for the agenda remain the same. However, we cannot "directly 'translate' any structure or method. Rather, take a fresh look at its core. What is it you want to achieve, and how can you use technology to make that happen? You will need to creatively adapt the structure to make it suit the virtual space" ([ibid](#)).

In most facilitated conversations, the group members will be respectful and participatory. However, there can be tensions that arise. Keep breathing and remember that you are here for the group as a whole. *Love WITH Accountability* reminds us that nobody is disposable: this is true on a societal level and in dialogue (Simmons, 2019). Each person has something to offer. Setting communication [ground rules](#) or [agreements](#) can support each person in contributing to a productive group experience. However, "for ground rules to be effective, the facilitator must be able to hold participants accountable to what the group has determined as important for everyone to feel safe" ([AAPIP](#)). Facilitators have a particular responsibility to ensure that learning for people with privilege doesn't happen at the expense of oppressed people, and that the etiquette of niceness doesn't silence certain participants. Tracy Wright shares, "I call on

white people to join and share too because people of color can't always be the ones to carry those conversation...I also say to allies I am not asking for perfection. Using voice is important if you an aspiring ally.” In addition to practicing this radical candor with the group, also be ready to move in affinity groups, personal reflection, or other activities as needed.

Facilitators are responsible for the whole group, and need to monitor everyone’s engagement. It is not a group interaction if only a few participate. To monitor the group as a whole, facilitators need to keep an eye on themselves, too. Reflect on:

<p>What facilitation techniques are you most comfortable with? Most uncomfortable with?</p>	<p>What types of participants do you most like and dislike? Be honest with yourself. What’s that about for you?</p>	<p>How comfortable are you with confronting or interrupting discriminatory or problematic behavior when it happens?</p>
<p>How does that show up in your practice?</p>	<p>How can you manage that in your practice?</p>	<p>What support or further learning do you need here?</p>

Most people are accustomed to classroom-style teaching, where the participant’s role is to receive information. Facilitated conversations, on the other hand, rely on active and equal participation of all. It is important to provide some orientation to participants, especially if this is a new activity for the coalition, on the expectations and norms of dialogue. It will also be important to put some information in your publicity for the event, in plain and transparent language, explaining that participants should expect to share in a conversation rather than learn in a classroom. Get comfortable with silence. When facilitators are silent and patient, it gives space to participants to find their words and contribute to the dialogue. Have plenty of flipcharts, paper, sticky notes, and markers! It’s much easier to change techniques around with these basic supplies. For

some conversations, it will also be helpful to prepare handouts on important terms or create fact sheets.

There are so many great tools to use in facilitation! We love continually learning and trying new things. Some of the RSP's favorite techniques come from:

- [World Café](#)
- [Appreciative Inquiry](#)
- [AORTA](#)
- [Liberating Structures](#)
 - And see their [online facilitation tips](#)
- [Beautiful Questions](#)
- [The Art of Powerful Questions](#)
- These [meeting](#) and [group](#) activities
- [The Circle Way](#)

Finally, keep breathing and remember this from [Emergent Strategy](#) (brown, 2017): there is always enough time for the right work, our efforts are never a failure but always a lesson, and we move at the speed of trust.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2016-TA-AX-K032 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

Aspects of the Dialogue

Questions/Concepts	Notes
<p>What is the purpose of this dialogue? <i>Think about why it's helpful for the attendees, as well as your desired outcomes.</i> <i>It can be useful to ask participants what they hope to get from the dialogue.</i></p>	
<p>What might bring this group together? <i>Depending on the participants, content, and setting, different types of ice breakers or introductory questions will be appropriate.</i> <i>For most questions, allot at least 3-5 minutes per person. Most icebreakers can be completed in 10-15 minutes (unless you add a report-back).</i></p>	
<p>What are the key terms or ideas? <i>Defining terms together can ease all following dialogue and generate additional questions.</i> <i>Collective defining builds equity and value of multiple forms of wisdom.</i></p>	
<p>What are the issues related to marginalized communities? <i>Think through the questions that are relevant to the discussion AND how the discussion will affect participants.</i> <i>How will you guard against a situation where people living in oppression are expected to teach or emotionally support people living with privilege?</i></p>	

<p>What are the structures or institutions that shape or influence this topic? <i>Questions in this area can help a group see beyond individual problems to systems.</i></p>	
<p>How does or how might this affect survivors and services to survivors? <i>Consider all survivors of sexual violence, from all backgrounds and all types of SV.</i></p>	
<p>How does or how might this affect advocates? <i>Talking about the effects on advocates can bring up new questions or ways of looking at things. It will also support advocates.</i></p>	
<p>What might the future hold? <i>Groups benefit from dreaming together and thinking of new possibilities. This can also help the coalition in planning.</i></p>	
<p>What can bring the dialogue to a healthy close? <i>A closing question such as “what are you taking home from this dialogue” can provide a sense of closure and connection. Allow plenty of time for a closing question; estimate three minutes per person.</i></p>	

Meeting Considerations

Factors	Notes
<p>How many people will attend? Who are they?</p> <p><i>For in-person gatherings of more than 15 people, use plenty of small group activities. Will participants know each other already? Do they come from the same profession or different ones? Will you have a cap on registration? Will this conversation benefit from a wide range of perspectives? How will you do outreach?</i></p>	
<p>What is the time allotted?</p> <p><i>Don't overfill the schedule. Fewer activities done with more time each is better for learning</i></p>	
<p>What are the accessibility factors?</p> <p><i>Think through the steps of each activity with accessibility in mind. You may need additional interpreters, for example.</i></p>	
<p>What is the setting for the meeting? Is it in person, online, or on the phone? Part of a conference or a stand-alone event?</p> <p><i>For groups that don't know each other, or for phone or online meeting, more active facilitation is needed. A facilitated conversation in the middle of a conference may need more transitional explanation for participants.</i></p>	