

Tips for Discussion Leaders

Excerpts from Guide for Effective Meetings and Discussion Leader Training (Nikki Harris)

Opening the Discussion

- Set climate—establish relationship of objectivity and caring about what everyone thinks and has to say.
- Set clear goals for the meeting. Make sure everyone is aware of the focus and scope of the discussion.
- Start discussion with a provocative, prepared question which calls for opinions not facts. It should stem directly from the introduction and lead to the first area to be discussed.

Keeping the Discussion Moving

- Use the questions prepared in the discussion (consensus) outline to help the group move from point to point. Remember to ask, not answer the questions.
- Be sensitive to the group. Know your outline, but be flexible. If the group digresses, point it out. Usually this will bring the group back to the subject.
- If members start repeating themselves, stop and recap in order to focus the discussion.
- When agreement is reached in any area, or the reasons for conflicting opinions emerge, stop to summarize. This will give the group a feeling of accomplishment.
- If the group gets bogged down on any point, ask the resource leader to provide additional information.
- If points of view cannot be reconciled, summarize both and move on.

Working Toward a Conclusion

The discussion leader can help the group move toward a conclusion by:

- Use of interim summary
- Judicious use of questions
- Ask for more resource information, if available
- Summarize several comments to relate them to a goal
- Look for areas of agreement and test them with the group
- Voting—over a procedural choice, when a decision has to be made at a certain time on a yes or no matter, when assessing major areas of concern, when time has run out.

Some Problem Situations

- Don't let the discussion be taken over by one or two vocal members. (Restating their basic point in short, objective sentences then asking the view of someone else or going on to a different aspect, is one way to move away from this situation.)
- If too many want to talk at once, maintain control by recognizing one person, then calling on the others in turn.

Plan in advance, on how to deal with these common situations:

- Late-comers
- Newcomers to the group
- When discussion is slow, do you call on someone by name?
- When the group gets bogged down with definitions
- Missing facts
- People who drift out early
- The silent ones (It is not mandatory for each person to speak at every meeting, but the discussion leader can help if it is lack of knowledge, confusion or shyness.)