

# Introduction to this facilitation resource



My regular posts at [facilitatebetter.substack.com](https://facilitatebetter.substack.com) (you can subscribe for free) provide more content you might like.

This brief facilitation resource highlights several core principles and high impact practices that should help you accelerate learning and retention in the workshops you lead, as well as facilitate better discussions overall.

Here are the topics explored on the pages that follow:

A facilitation framework for any meeting or workshop (p. 2)

Privilege active learning in your workshop (pp. 3-4)

Help participants make connections & meaning (pp. 5-6)

Create and maintain a climate conducive to conversation (pp 7-8)

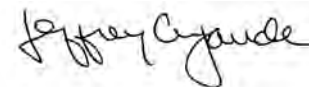
(Re)calibrate content and process. Prepare to call an audible. (pp. 9-10)

How to handle three common group dynamics you may encounter in meetings and workshops (pp. 11-13)

A list of best and worst facilitation practices (page 14)

Annotated bibliography of additional resources (page 15)

I hope you'll find this content helpful as you prepare to design and facilitate your WEFTEC sessions, as well as in your future meeting or workshop facilitation efforts.



Jeffrey Cufaude, [facilitatebetter@mail.com](mailto:facilitatebetter@mail.com)

Facilitation is about *making it easier*.



**1.**  
**WHAT**

do I want to make easier?

In general?

Specifically?

**2.**  
for **WHOM**  
am I trying to  
make this easier?

What do I know or need  
to know about them  
to determine what they  
*might* find easier?

**3.**  
**HOW**  
might I do this in my  
design and facilitation  
choices? What options  
are available to me  
before, during, and  
after the event?

When preparing to facilitate a meeting or a workshop, your efforts will always benefit by exploring these three questions and applying the answers to the advance design and real-time facilitation choices you make.

*Learn more about how to do so in this linked short essay.*



Robert Talbert  
professor of mathematics  
Grand Valley State University

“When building a course or a class session, I give active learning a privileged position. Lecture if it's appropriate, but realize that sense-making only happens through active work, in a social setting involving other learners. Put as much of this in every class as possible.”

Jeffrey Cufaude, Facilitate Better • [facilitatebetter.substack.com](http://facilitatebetter.substack.com)

Unlike a cellphone plan's unlimited minutes and texts, workshop presenters and meeting facilitators don't get unlimited airtime. Attempting to act as if we do can come at a great cost: a likely decline in participant interest, attention, and contributions.

Effective session design and facilitation privileges processes and formats that actively engage **both** introverted and extroverted participants in order to maximize their attention, energy, knowledge, and insights.

Extroverts generally engage and gain energy through external participation: talking with others, doing a hands-on activity, et al. Extroverts are more likely to “think out loud.”

Introverts generally engage and gain energy through internal participation: reading and reflecting, answering questions on a worksheet, et al. Introverts are more likely to think silently.

A general rule of thumb to guide your efforts is the following: when you want introverted participants to share verbally, consider having them first jot down some responses to the questions you're posing. You don't have to do this every time, but using this approach at core moments or the first time you ask for participant interaction increases the likelihood of more equitable engagement among extroverts and introverts.

### **Active considerations for your content**

Great workshops tend to leverage the knowledge of the presenter(s), as well as the knowledge of the participants. Doing so requires that presenters move beyond just being a “sage on the stage” and make an active commitment to serve as “facilitators of learning.” An effective way to do so is to intentionally calibrate the content you present **to** participants and the content you draw out **from** participants as reflected in the cone model and additional information on page four.

## Approach #1: Your present content to participants.

You present content (the *What?*) and then facilitate a process or format in which participants make sense of it, exploring the *So What?* and *Now What?* Even here you may hold some of your contributions in reserve, sprinkling them in during the subsequent discussion when you feel participants would benefit from your additional insights.

When lecturing or “talking at” participants, incorporating one or more of the following in a manner that corresponds to your content you can somewhat decrease their passivity:

- Fill-in-the-blank worksheet
- Notetaking worksheet with prompts
- BINGO or another game with the answers embedded in your presentation
- Polling (online, raise your hand, cellphone, et al)
- Provocations or blatantly incorrect information to elicit strong reactions
- Memorable metaphors, analogies, stories
- Mnemonic device like acronyms, acrostics, or rhymes

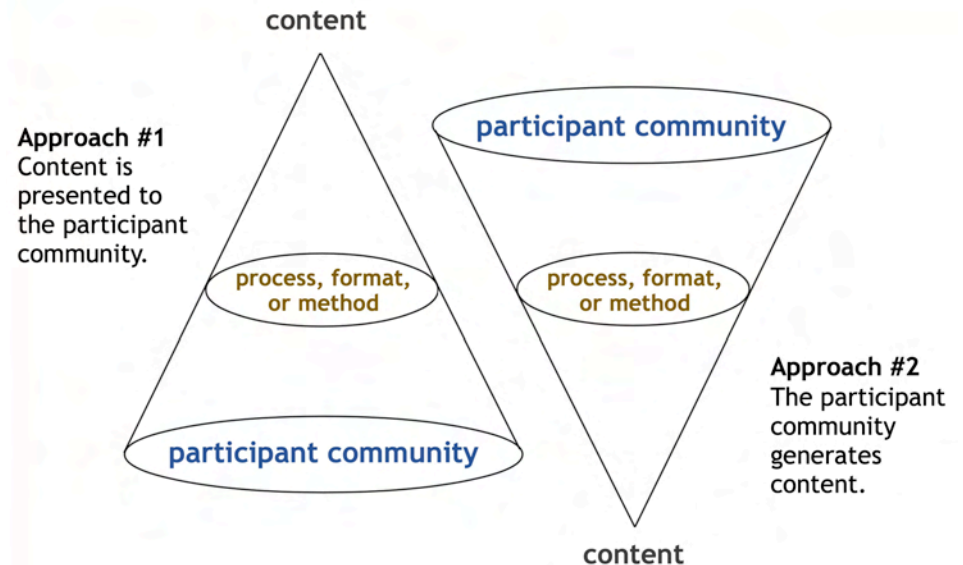
## Approach #2: You draw out content *from* the participants.

In this approach, you design and facilitate a format or process in which participants contribute or create content that is then shared with each other. Subsequent processes and facilitated large group discussion make additional sense of it and help individuals apply it to their own efforts (exploring the *So What?* and *Now What?*).

## Approach #2 examples:

You might have people work in small groups to explore some compelling questions you provide or a case study you assign. You then reconvene all participants for a short presentation segment your lead. Small groups then return to the original questions or case studies and explore if they would respond or do anything differently based on the content you just shared.

You have participants read a short article or watch a video clip. They then break into small groups to discuss their takeaways from that content. Conclude with facilitated open discussion.



Content cones inspired by the people, process, content facilitation levels in *Facilitation* by Trevor Bentley.

You deplane and immediately check your phone or the gate monitor. You want to know one thing: *where do I go next?* *Where is my connection?*

Whether it be volunteers on a conference call, staff colleagues in a meeting, or learners participating in a workshop, they seek the same thing: **connections**. And in our multi-tasking, information-overloaded world, helping make connections is a vital part of effective facilitation.

What can happen if meeting or workshop discussions lack timely connections? Relevant comments go unheard, conversation quality declines, application of ideas falters, and meaning and relevance dissipates.

**Effective facilitation makes/invites connections and helps participants make meaning.**



## Making connections for learning

Workshop facilitators in particular need to help *connect* their **content** to the different **contexts** individuals may represent, as well as invite individuals to make meaning of the ideas and issues being discussed. Doing so explicitly helps individuals realize greater learning value.

Content insufficiently connected to context(s) often temporarily raises learner awareness, but does not lead to meaningful or enduring change in mindset or behavior.

To make it easier for participants to connect your **content** to their **contexts**, engage them in exploring two questions:

**Implications:** *So what? Why or how does this matter? In general? For you? For others?*

**Applications:** *Now what? What might you (or others) wish to do differently? How might you apply this information?*

You might first have them do so individually on their own and then connect in pairs, quartets, or small groups to share and discuss their respective responses.

When presenting you also can make potential connections explicit:

*“Here is what this might mean for your efforts and here are some ways you can apply this information.”*

Follow this by inviting participants to offer their reactions:

*What are additional implications or applications you see?*

## Meaning Is not universal

Individuals filter what happens in a conversation, meeting, or workshop through their respective lenses, roles, and experiences in order to make sense of things ... to **make meaning** for themselves. Periodically surfacing these different meanings can help knit together a richer and more robust understanding among participants.

In doing so, consider inviting more introverted participants to share their sense of the conversation. Why? Their more contemplative nature often is quite conducive to distilling the dialogue. *“I’d love to hear what our quieter participants in the conversation are noticing or sensing”.*

Pausing for such “check-ins” can be especially valuable if clusters of participants share perspectives that may influence the meaning they may make; i.e. individuals from different departments, people with different levels of knowledge or experience, people from different geographic locations, or organization sizes (employees, budget, et al).

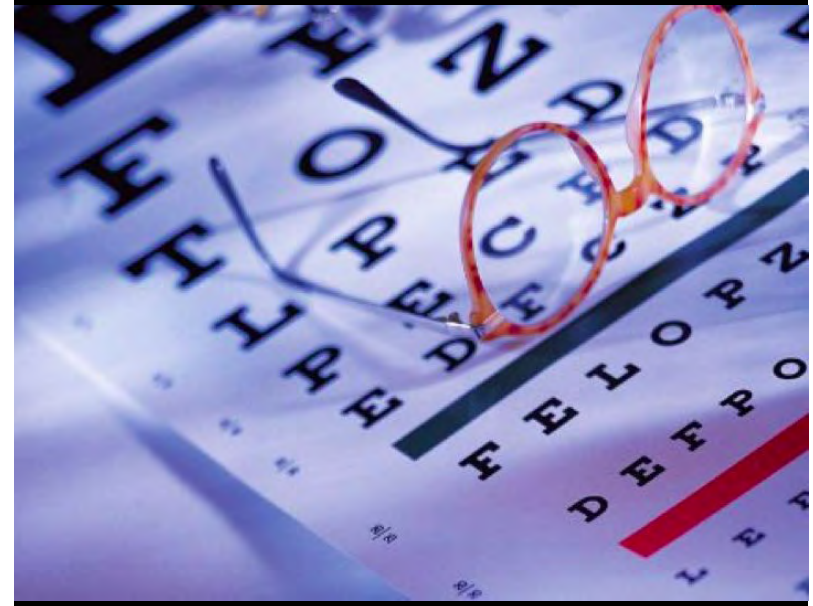
In this case, consider a **multi-round exercise** for more extensive reflection and debriefing:

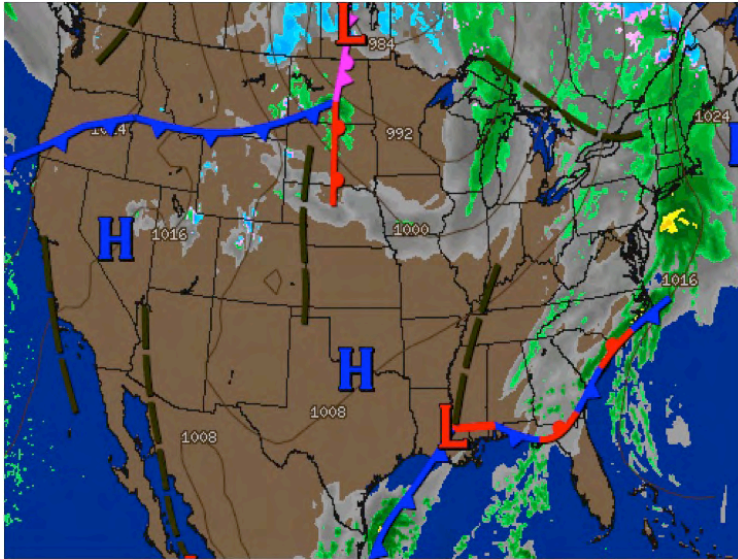
- Divide participants into these “commonality clusters” and identify the implications and applications of your content for their shared affinity.

- Reconvene as a large group for further reflection and processing.

Some learners experience a disconnect if they don’t believe they can **adopt** outright an idea, concept, or practice introduced in a workshop: *“There’s no way that would work in our organization.”* In these instances, effective facilitation asks them to consider how they might **adapt** what is suggested so that it will more likely work in their respective context.

**Participants are always filtering any content presented through their own experiences and lenses to make meaning from it.**





One of the most important facilitator responsibilities is creating and maintaining a meeting or workshop environment conducive to conversation. We want session participants to feel comfortable freely sharing their ideas and insights, asking questions of the presenter(s) and each other, and engaging in thoughtful conversation with others in the workshop.

Two vital areas that can help make that easier are (1) the meeting or workshop environment and (2) techniques and formats used to draw out participants

## 1. The meeting or workshop environment

The meeting room layout (or the online platform) can significantly influence the ease and quality of any conversation. Just before your session begins, scan the room to see if you may want to make any adjustments in order to make the environment more conducive to conversation. This could include asking people to take seats closer to the front, to join other tables to build a critical mass at each one, or moving their chairs to form small groups for conversation.

Consider varying the environment for different segments of your session. If your room has ample perimeter space, inviting people to form small groups along the walls for “stand up” meetings can be an effective way to build a bit of energy from the physical movement and get participants connected to people either than those seated near them. Note spots for groups to gather by either posting large numbers or some other demarcation on the walls where you want them to gather.

Remember that you (and any other presenters) also are part of the environment. How you position yourself in relation to the participants can affect the conversation climate.

### *Example:*

Coming down off the stage/risers where you have been presenting and standing closer to the participants when you open the floor for Q&A. This moves you closer to participants and creates a stronger connection that is more conducive to an exchange with them.

### **Don't forget:**

Always position yourself so you're both seen and heard easily.

## 2. The techniques and formats used to draw out participants' contributions

Just opening the floor to questions may not elicit the active participation you seek. You may wish to consider using one or more of the following techniques to accelerate meaningful conversation.

### *Use small groups for conversations.*

Small groups often feel more comfortable for participants and they also place a very subtle pressure on people to share their ideas with each other. Groups of 5-7 are generally considered ideal.

If people aren't seated at tables, you can ask them to cluster with 5-6 others in their immediate vicinity or you can invite to form stand-up groups at any of the areas you've demarcated around the room.

You can assign groups a case study or a few discussion questions. Provide these instructions and information on a slide and/or on a handout distributed to each group. Offering them verbally is insufficient.

Small groups generally expect they will report out. If you will invite them to do so, be aware that such reporting can eat up a lot of time in a session. You may wish to only hear from a representative sampling of groups

### *Do a "think-pair-share."*

Pose a question for everyone to first answer on their own (jotting down their thoughts). Then invite them to pair with another participant and share their responses. If desired, you could then have pairs join with each other to form a quartet and briefly share their respective responses.

Follow this more intimate sharing by facilitating some discussion with all participants: *"Now that you've had a chance to share with each other, I'd love to have a few people highlight a response they think everyone should hear, either the one they shared or the one they heard."*

### *Do a lightning round.*

One of my favorite approaches to use near a session's end is a lightning round. It is similar to how sportscasts and political talk shows do countdown rounds to address a number of topics. The intense focus for a brief time period keeps participants engaged and allows you to address a healthy number of remaining questions.

My general approach is 8-10 questions with no more than 2 minutes/question. Displaying a timer on the screen or even an hourglass adds to the intensity and energy.

To gather questions for the lightning round, explain how many we can address and then invite individuals (or groups) who have a question to note it on an index card and submit it to you.

Announce the first question/case and launch your timing device (I often have a participant serve as monitor). You can offer a possible answer and/or invite participants to **succinctly** do so. If you're going to do the latter it sometimes helps upfront to offer an example of how not to give an answer since the time is so limited.

When time is called move on to the next question and repeat until you've exhausted your list. Remember, the goal during lightning round is not to discuss the questions, but to rapidly share responses to them.



Some workshops are designed to raise awareness and change mindsets. Some focus on helping participants learn new skills or behaviors. Many workshops are a bit of both.

Achieving your workshop outcomes requires an initial session design that appropriately calibrates *both what the group discusses, decides, or learns (content) and how they do so (process), as well as* real-time adjustments as warranted. When that does not occur, problems often result.

The right content rushed through too quickly can leave participants confused or unlikely to retain any insights learned. A workshop design that honors and elicits significant individual contributions, but fails to effectively blend them with any presentation segments can feel disjointed and unsatisfying.



Effective facilitation appropriately (re)calibrates content & process to achieve desired outcomes.

## Initial session design and calibration

When designing a workshop agenda and content flow, presenters and facilitators determine an **initial calibrated mix** of content and formats, exercises, or processes that will work for (1) the outcomes specified, (2) the individuals who will be involved, and (3) the logistics (session length, room set or online platform, placement in the day or conference schedule, etc.).

But you also should plan additional content, identify alternative formats for each segment of the meeting or workshop, create the requisite collateral materials (slides, handouts, et al), and prepare to draw on them when the need to do so becomes evident. This additional preparation sets us up for successful **real-time recalibration** as our initial content and process choices play out in real time with participants.

This is similar to a quarterback calling an audible during a football game. The offensive coordinator has called a play. The quarterback communicates it to those on the field. But as he steps up to take the snap he notices something about the defense's formation, something that makes him think a different play might be more effective. He calls an audible, a new play. The offensive line shifts formation for the new play and the ball is snapped.

Quarterbacks call an audible when something they see in the opposing team evokes uncertainty about the planned play. Workshop presenters or meeting facilitators might do so when they notice something about the participants, group dynamics, time remaining, or session environment that gives them pause about their overall session design or what comes next on the agenda or outline.

## **Example: content recalibration in action**

During an initial workshop segment you're leading it becomes apparent that many participants lack foundational knowledge upon which the rest of your session builds. You shift gears and do a quick quiz about some of these fundamentals, drawing out information about the correct answers from more knowledgeable participants and adding your own contributions as needed.

## **Example: Process recalibration in action**

A segment designed for large group discussion produces silence and blank stares. You opt to break the content into multiple questions and assign each to a small group to explore. When participants reconvene, each group briefly highlights their discussion and you facilitate open Q&A and large group discussion.

## **The ripple effects of recalibration**

“Calling an audible,” modifying your planned content or process in real time, is a hallmark of effective facilitation as it increases the meeting or workshop value to participants. But doing so has a ripple effect for the rest of your meeting or workshop design and facilitation.

Consider the content and process recalibration examples offered. Both use more time and engage participants' attention and energy differently than your initial design would have. This may mean that subsequent segments of your session need real-time recalibration.

You may have planned to divide into small groups for conversations after the segment you originally envisioned for large group discussion. Doing so now would be redundant since you used that format to address the lackluster response to your original design. You also likely need to make up some time. Always be vigilant in determining what additional adjustments any recalibrations you make may require.

As a workshop presenter or meeting facilitator, you're essentially the **quarterback of the participant experience**. When you can competently and comfortably make real-time content or format substitutions in response to session conditions, you facilitate more effective learning experiences and meetings and better serve participants. Think of this as a more advanced stage of effectiveness that is worth pursuing as you further develop your presentation and facilitation skills.



Many people, particularly those newer to meeting or workshop facilitation, see silence as a cause for concern. They sometimes perceive it as negative feedback that their presentation or facilitation efforts are ineffective. Silence can make them nervous or uncomfortable.

But silence from meeting or workshop attendees is a form of participation, particularly those who are more introverted. Be careful to avoid equating it with a problem you need to handle. Instead think of it as a conversational dynamic to manage, one of many involved in the facilitation of meetings and workshops.

Here are four suggestions to help you think about and manage silence in your facilitation efforts.

## 1. Rethink your perspective on silence.

Noticing that people are silent is an *observation*. The meaning you attach to the silence is an *inference*, one derived from your own beliefs, values, and experiences.

While it is true that silence can mean disinterest or confusion, it also can be a sign of *introverted* or *internal* participation. People often need time to think and have a conversation with themselves before engaging in dialogue with others.

More extroverted speakers and facilitators feed off the energy of participant contributions. Silence provides them little fuel. As a result, they may need to be particularly vigilant about allowing for silence and the reflection it often signifies.

In musical terms, silence is the space between the notes. A composer uses it with intention to provide emphasis and to shape the overall composition and listening experience. It is important for speakers and facilitators to do the same, and to embrace silence as a normal and desirable part of a conversation, meeting, or workshop.

## 2. Don't rush in and fill the silence.

Jumping in may disrupt people who are reflecting or preparing to respond. Our role as facilitators is to simply “hold the space” to allow for that work to occur.

In some cases, group members may be waiting for someone else to go first because of the challenging nature of the discussion. It shouldn't be you.

If you pose a question that is met with silence, try to resist answering it yourself. Doing so can send the message that you'll fill the silence and do the work of participants.

## 3. Invite verbal contributions.

Sometimes I try a little humor to break the silence:  
*“So sorry. I've confused you. This is the audience participation part of the program.”*

The mild chuckles this often elicits help release any tension in the air and usually lead to someone jumping in with a response. If it doesn't, try one of the following:

*“I'd love to hear a few responses from people we have not heard from yet in this discussion.”*

*“Can I get a few of you to share your thoughts or feelings? Who is willing to start?”*

## 4. Ask about the silence if it persists.

**Share your observation:** *I notice we're having a lot of silence.*

**Check your inference:** *I'm wondering if my questions/ instructions aren't clear or if this discussion isn't resonating with you.*

Stop. Wait for participants to share what their silence means. Then determine what to do next.

# How can I manage one or more people dominating a discussion? 12

Facilitating exceptionally verbal participants in a meeting or workshop can be quite challenging. Silencing a participant in front of others though is fraught with pitfalls.

Here are three practical tips for facilitating more equitable engagement among all participants in a session:

## 1. Shift your focus.

Instead of silencing or reducing the verbal participation from some, focus on **increasing the verbal contributions from other participants**.

“I’d love to hear from people who have yet to comment.”

“I’d love to hear from some folks at the back tables.”

“I’d love to hear from people from large organizations.”

“I’d love to hear from everyone on this, so we’ll do a quick go around. Feel free to pass or simply ditto/echo a previous comment if you have nothing to add.”

If gathered in person, physically moving a bit closer to those invited often generates more responses as they feel more accountable to answer. Just be careful to not shine too bright a spotlight so that it becomes awkward.

## 2. Change the participation format.

Extroverts tend to think out loud more, so open discussion privileges that style of contribution. Shifting to a hybrid format that first favors introversion may draw out contributions from those who currently participate silently.

*Do a Think-Pair-Share.* Have everyone write down a response to a question. Invite people to form pairs (or triads or quartets) and discuss their responses. Have people repeat with new partners as desired. End with open facilitated discussion.

## *Do a Gallery Wall (space permitting)*

Have everyone write down a response to a question on an index card and post it in a designated area on the wall(s) of your room. Invite people to silently read everyone’s responses. Reconvene participants for a facilitated large group discussion.

## *Do a Read-Pass-Reflect*

Have everyone write down a response to a question on an index card. Gather all the cards, shuffle, and redistribute. Have people silently read their new card, pass it to another person, and read the card passed to them. Repeat as many rounds as desired. Invite people to reflect on the different perspectives they read. Close with facilitated open discussion.

## 3. Pause the heavy participators.

As noted earlier, this choice can be a bit dicey, but it can work well if done in a supportive rather than punitive manner:

*“I see hands up from Carl, Tim, and Heather. You know what? They’ve done a lot of heavy lifting in the discussion so far, so I’d like them to mute themselves for a moment while we hear from some of the rest of you.”*

You might then turn to one of the previously mentioned invitational phrases to draw out specific participants.

Notice the intentional, but subtle difference between *“I’m going to mute them for a moment”* and *“I’d like them to mute themselves for a moment.”* The former is a directive; the latter is an invitation, one I find is generally accepted.

People ask this question presumably because they see a tangent as problematic. But human beings do not always think in linear predictable patterns. Our minds often make interesting and unexpected connections.

Sometimes a tangent is a temporary detour into a more productive or interesting conversation, one not anticipated on the agenda. Other times, it indeed is an unhelpful distraction from a more important discussion. Knowing which is happening is critical to determine the appropriate facilitation response.

## Assessing the tangent

To decide, we can draw on two of the several diagnostic questions Roger Schwarz poses in *The Skilled Facilitator*:

- (1) Have I observed long enough to make a reliable diagnosis? If so ...
- (2) Is what's happening a problem?

Question #1 asks us to not jump in immediately, to let things play out a bit. The second question calls for an inference or subjective judgment about what is observed.

If you can answer yes to question #1, consider simply raising the issue with the group by sharing only an observation, initially keeping your opinions about it to yourself:

*It seems we're getting a bit off-topic.*

Stopping here allows group members to react to what's happening even though you've not formally posed question #2. You can, of course, more directly invite their opinions:

*It seems we're getting a bit off-topic. I wonder if this is what you think most needs discussion right now.*

## When people want to pursue the tangent

If participants indicate they want to discuss the tangent, negotiate an initial time limit for doing so.

*We still have a lot on our agenda, but since there is some interest in this topic might I suggest we focus on it for #\_\_\_ minutes and then reassess where to go next?*

Establishing a time limit for the tangential topic helps you manage the clock and reassures those participants who may be less certain about the tangent's value.

## When the tangent can be addressed later

"Parking lots" are a useful facilitation tool to help you record seemingly tangential topics to possibly address later in a session. If the group instead indicates the topic is useful but can be set aside, I usually ask for a show of hands to determine in which of *two parking lots* it should be placed:

- (1) Not right now, but today
- (2) Not right now, but in the future

Using two parking lots helps distinguish the more pressing topics from those that can wait for another day. I also find it helpful to label my parking lots as illustrated in order to further define what needs attention.

Remember, it is facilitator malpractice to park items, but never return to them during a session or to do so in a rushed manner. Always include adequate time in an agenda to address parked items.

## BEST PRACTICES

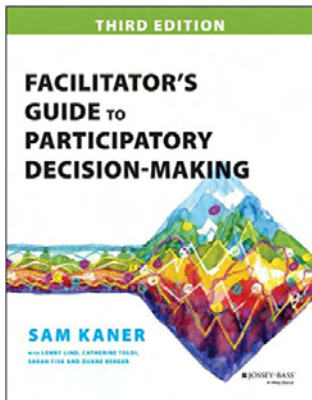
1. carefully assess the needs of the members
2. probe sensitively into people's feelings
3. create an open and trusting atmosphere
4. help people understand why they're there
5. speak in simple and direct language
6. display energy and appropriate levels of assertiveness
7. champion ideas not personally favored
8. treat all participants as equals
9. stay flexible and ready to change direction if necessary
10. listen intently to understand totally what is being said
11. periodically summarize a complex array of ideas so that they form a coherent summary
12. make sure every session ends with clear steps for the next meeting
13. ensure that participants feel ownership for what has been achieved

➔ **Assess your own facilitation efforts against this list of best and worst practices.**

1. remain oblivious to what the group thinks or needs
2. never check group concerns
3. not listen carefully to what's being said
4. lose track of key ideas
5. try to be the center of attention
6. get defensive
7. get into personality battles
8. put down people
9. unassertively manage conflict
10. let a few people or the leader dominate
11. never check how the meeting is going
12. be overly passive on process
13. push ahead on an irrelevant agenda
14. have no alternative approaches
15. let discussions get badly side-tracked
16. let discussion ramble without proper closure
17. not know when to stop
18. be insensitive to cultural diversity issues
19. use inappropriate humor

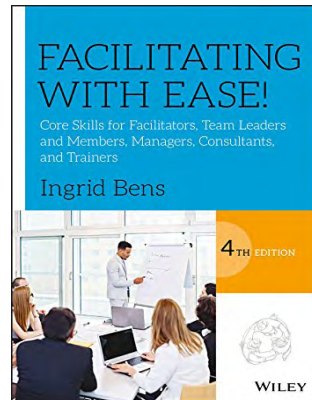
## WORST PRACTICES

Other favorites include: *Humble Inquiry* by Edgar Schein, *Turning to One Another* by Margaret Wheatley, *The Art of Convening* by Craig and Patricia Neal, *Facilitation* by Trevor Bentley, *Community* by Peter Block, *Dialogue* by William Isaacs, *Designing Experiences* by J. Robert Rossman and Mathew D. Duerden, and *Gamestorming* by Dave Gray, Sunni Brown, and James Macanufo.



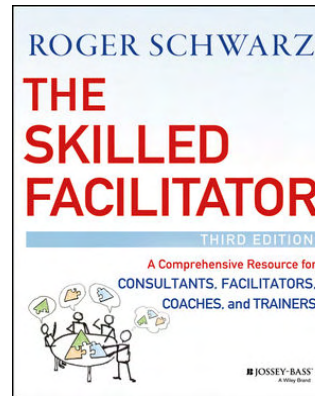
*Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*

I turn to this book on a regular basis as it is full of tools and techniques that can help you design and facilitate almost any situation you will encounter. It is an invaluable resource regardless of your experience level.



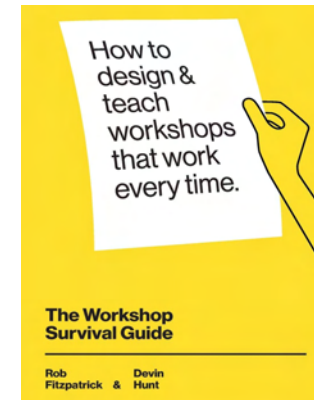
*Facilitating with Ease!*

This is the book I tend to recommend most to novice or less experienced facilitators as it provides a solid overview of key concepts, some useful tools, and insight into how to handle situations you'll likely face.



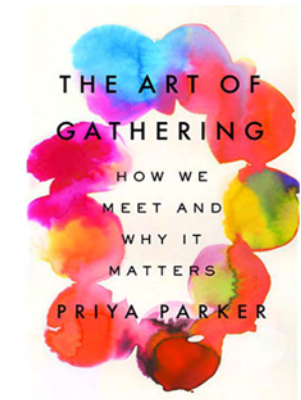
*The Skilled Facilitator*

Schwarz's book is the one I share most with more experienced facilitators. It digs deeper into the key aspects of effective facilitation and provides useful frameworks, tools, and models to inform your judgment.



*The Workshop Survival Guide*

An excellent resource for those looking to create compelling learning experiences, but have little or no instructional design background. It walks you through the steps and provide practical tips for designing a successful workshop.



*The Art of Gathering*

Subtitled *How We Meet and Why It Matters*, Parker's book guides us on designing more purposeful events. I find her insights particularly useful when designing or facilitating multiple-day programs.