



## Methods for Facilitation

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | Principles: Facilitation for Transformation       |
| 2 | <b>Skills: Building Capacity as a Facilitator</b> |
| 3 | Activities: Structuring Professional Learning     |

# Methods for Facilitation Guide 2

## Skills: Building Capacity as a Facilitator

“Within a transformational model of team development ... we seek to actively rupture those patterns that exist in our society at large and in our political structures—those that place greater value on the voices of some groups of people—because we know we need the insight, wisdom, perspectives, and opinions of everyone, especially those whose voices have not been heard as much as others.”

– Elena Aguilar, *The Art of Coaching Teams*

Facilitating a school improvement effort grounded in transformational learning—the kind that changes the way a group of educators think about their own practice—involves more than moving through a set of steps or tools. Transformational learning is a nonlinear process that requires creative facilitation. Developing the right kind of communication, relational, and analytical skills can help a facilitator spark, navigate, and shape team conversations so that learning and decision making can happen collectively and meaningfully. This guide provides an overview of **five skills that are essential for effective facilitation of educators**: listening, questioning, engaging, connecting, and sustaining. Readers will explore ways to sharpen these facilitation skills as they support educators in meaningful conversations that lead to purposeful action.



### Learning Objectives:

1. Understand five fundamental skills for facilitating teams in effective school improvement conversations.
2. Gain familiarity with strategies to use when encountering different facilitation challenges.

### In this Guide:

**Skills & Considerations:** Explore skills for effective facilitation of professional learning

**Reflection & Planning:** Consider ways of using facilitator moves in challenging scenarios

**Further Exploration:** Review resources for building and reflecting on facilitation skills



## Skills & Considerations

Transformational learning requires that team members trust one another, explore new ideas from research and analysis constructively, reflect on experience, and have space to surface emerging needs, all while collectively moving toward a common goal.

At Eskolta we consider five skills critical to effective facilitation:



### Listen

Genuinely seek to understand and capture meaning from others



### Question

Draw on experience, research, and analysis to respectfully push thinking



### Engage

Combine humor and earnestness, humility and confidence, structure and flexibility to set a comfortable tone



### Connect

Find themes and relationships among ideas to help people solve problems and focus on goals



### Sustain

Cultivate and monitor team dynamics that build toward collective efficacy

## Skill 1: Listen

Active listening is a powerful tool for transformational learning. It entails putting yourself in the shoes of the people you are listening to and seeking to understand what they are saying and why are they saying it. Not only does this help with the process of building trust during group conversations, but it helps others understand themselves and their own thinking. In this way active listening is productive—by encouraging elaboration and rephrasing back ideas, you are inviting a group to use discussion as a thinking process, collectively surfacing and shaping ideas that move the team toward action.

During conversations, use a balance of comments, silence, body language, paraphrasing, and attentive note-taking to demonstrate that you are actively listening to what your team has to say:

- \* **Use silence, comments, and actions to invite participants to elaborate on their ideas** and demonstrate that you are genuinely interested in what they are saying. Create space for participants to share key ideas by using a few well-placed and minimal comments (for example, “Tell me more about that...”). This shows that you are following a participant’s train of thought, but not trying to move them too aggressively in one direction. Silence can also be a useful tool to allow participants to process significant ideas or formulate a thought to share with the group discussions. If participants truly seem unable to come up with something to contribute, paraphrase what you heard during small-group



discussion, or share an idea based on one of the key themes or examples you anticipated prior to the meeting. Similarly, employ body language—leaning in while people are speaking, nodding, and taking notes while still focusing on them—to demonstrate your engagement as participants speak.

- \* **Find opportunities to hear from individuals.** During small-group activities, listen for comments that might resonate with the full group or individual comments that might provide you with more insights into individual participants' interests. As you reconvene the full group, ask individuals to share highlights or make connections between what you heard between members of groups.
- \* **Paraphrase** to help participants say more and clarify the ideas they have. When someone shares a complex idea, confirm your understanding by paraphrasing what they shared with a phrase like, "So, if I'm understanding you correctly, you're saying that..." If you find that an idea someone shared seems only loosely related to the topic, you can both paraphrase their comment and relate it to the objective at hand with a comment such as, "What I'm hearing is... Does that seem like it fits in with our goals for this session...?"
- \* **Take visible and parsimonious notes** on a notepad, chart paper, or a whiteboard. This is a way for groups to see ideas taking shape and provide opportunities for them to respond and make their own connections. Asking questions to confirm the accuracy of your notes— "This is what I got down, is that right?" "Does this capture everything we talked about?"—provides opportunities for participants to correct your understanding and clarify their thinking. Visible note-taking also helps keep discussions on track or redirect them as needed. For example, if a person raises a point wholly unrelated to the discussion, you can capture it in a separate "parking lot" or, through questioning, capture in the notes how the comment relates to the discussion at hand.
- \* **Be on the lookout for hidden assumptions to uncover when important.** Listening means trying to understand team members individually as well as their culture and context. At Eskolta, we often work in schools in low-income, under-served neighborhoods. There is an unjust history that has affected these communities. As you listen to the group discussion, ask yourself whether participants are actively trying to understand and value the experiences of the students and families from the community their school serves. Be on the lookout for opportunities to push this conversation in either direction. For example, one Eskolta facilitator, when faced with a participant who insisted that state tests should be the only data point used for accountability "because they are more objective," took the moment to highlight that all assessments are subjective and influenced by untold assumptions.



**See this concept in action:**

*Before a session, anticipate 3-4 themes that may emerge in a conversation so that you can be prepared to spark discussion. For an example, see guidance for identifying examples prior to a discussion in the [Facilitator Cheat Sheet in Learning Mindsets Session 3: Sense of Belonging](#).*



## Skill 2: Question

Great questions push thinking without inhibiting communication. They force people to restate, rethink, and clarify what they believe and why, but in a way that respects their viewpoint. They can help people articulate complex ideas in simple language and explore the tension between experience, analysis, and research. In this way, when you ask thoughtful questions, you show that you are seeking answers with others as opposed to arguing against them.

Two different types of questions—clarifying and probing—can be used throughout a session to push thinking and keep conversations moving:

### Ask Clarifying Questions

- \* **To better understand what a person is trying to say.** For example: “Tell me more about that...” “So, what I’m hearing is... Is that right?” “Can you share an example of that?” “Tell me more about how that would look...”
- \* **To encourage participants to elaborate,** particularly when you sense potential or concern. For example: If a participant offers a comment such as, “I’m not sure our students feel that they belong during those events,” which signals they have insight on the topic without further explanation, ask them to elaborate with simple prompts (“Say more about that...” or “I’m going to push on that a little. Could you say more about why you think that?”). In doing this, it often helps to ask for specific examples or to ask participants to visualize and describe what something looks like.
- \* **To check for group understanding,** particularly when consensus seems vital. For example: After gathering multiple insights during a group discussion, provide a brief summary and then pose a question to confirm that you captured their perspective well. (“Tell me, does this look like I got it right? Did I understand you correctly...?”)

### Ask Probing Questions

- \* **To ground in personal experience,** particularly if conversation thus far has been too abstract. For instance: “Think of a time in your own experience when you felt like you belonged in an academic community. What did that feel like?”
- \* **To ground in data,** particularly if conversation has tended to be too simplistic or reductionist. For instance: “What do you know about the students who had the largest drops or gains in attendance that could provide insights into those changes? What steps could you take to learn more about the reasons for these changes?”
- \* **To ground in outside research,** particularly if conversation has jumped to ideas that are too unproven or that you are aware may diverge from what research suggests is effective. For instance: “To what extent does the Hess Matrix reinforce, challenge, or extend your thinking?”



#### See this concept in action:

For examples of how to facilitate conversations grounded in participants’ own student data, see the [Facilitator Guide for Attendance Support Session 2: Data Driven Practices that Improve Attendance](#).



#### Download Related Materials:

For more information about the Hess Matrix, see [Assessment Rigor and the Hess Matrix in Assessment Session 2: Assessment and Higher-Order Thinking](#).



## Skill 3: Engage

Some facilitators may have close relationships with the participants on their team, while others may not be in the same department, grade team, school, or organization. In either case, it is the facilitator's role to foster team cohesion and a shared purpose. Facilitators can apply **four key techniques** to build initial comfort while also setting a tone that steers the group toward ongoing productivity and engagement:

- \* **Open conversations by grounding participants in the reasons why they are doing this work.** During team meetings, it can be easy to focus only on getting things done without the compelling reason why. At the beginning of every conversation, show that you recognize the importance of the team's work with a brief restatement of why they are here and what they will get out of the session. One part of engagement is about discovering and aligning to participants' larger goals, motivations, and sense of purpose. A second critical part is about situating participants' work in the larger compelling purpose of achieving greater societal equity and justice, reminding them that at its core the work of improvement in schools is about confronting racism and poverty. Take the opportunity to ask participants what they hope to get out of the meeting.
- \* **Set norms and community agreements to build comfort.** For some teams, especially those who have worked together in an ongoing way, group norms may be implicitly understood by all members. However, for veteran teams as well as teams just beginning to collaborate, inviting the group to discuss how they want to engage in the work and learn together can help them develop a common language and invite reflection over the lifetime of the group. Having a conversation to decide what those norms should be can set a tone for what on-going collaboration looks like—how teams make space for all members to voice ideas, how they maintain confidentiality when discussing sensitive issues, or how they express disagreement.



### See this concept in action:

*Create a safe space by establishing community agreements at the start of a conversation. See an example in the [Facilitator Guide for Attendance Support Session 1: The Power of Invisibility](#).*

### Set Equity-Focused Norms

Consider introducing the example of “The Four Agreements” at the start of work with a team as a launching point to create a set of norms that you can return to at subsequent meetings.

- \* **Stay engaged:** Staying engaged means remaining morally, emotionally, intellectually, and socially involved in the dialogue
- \* **Experience discomfort:** This norm acknowledges that discomfort is inevitable, especially in dialogue about race in multiracial groups, and that participants make a commitment to bring issues into the open. It is not talking about these issues that creates divisiveness.

The divisiveness already exists in the society and in our schools. It is through dialogue, even when uncomfortable, that healing and change begin.

- \* **Speak your truth:** This means being open about your own thoughts and feelings without saying what you think others want to hear.
- \* **Expect and accept non-closure:** This agreement asks participants to hang out in uncertainty and not rush to quick solutions, especially in relation to racial understanding, which requires ongoing dialogue.

Source: Singleton, G. E. & Linton, C (2006). *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.





- \* **Connect human-scale changes to national issues.** Our work matters not only because it is about effecting change in the lives of students in schools, but also because it connects to something bigger. In various ways, efforts in public schools can and should connect to the larger purpose of combatting racism, poverty, and oppression, as well as recognizing the often-overlooked strength and resilience that students of color and students in poverty have exhibited in our country. Making this connection can help participants engage with the societal importance of the work. For example, if appropriate, note early in the process that many of the students in the school's community are low-income and students of color and that that means there are strengths and experiences they bring that we should all seek to understand, whether we ourselves have been through the same experiences as them or not.
- \* **Speak from experience, but with humility.** Show you have relevant experience or knowledge, but also that you don't know it all. When introducing new material to a school team or colleagues, emphasize that you are not there to deliver a prescribed package or set of steps for them to turnkey, but rather are providing space and structure for the group to reflect on new ideas and plan how to put them into action.
- \* **Keep it light.** Through it all, maintain a sense of humor. Working in schools and hoping to take on entrenched centuries of systemic inequity entails constant challenges, bureaucratic demands, and unexpected problems to address. In your interactions with educators, recognize those challenges with an attitude that acknowledges and finds humor with them, but never at the expense of the people you are working with or respect for the students.

## Skill 4: Connect

Listening and questioning generate a great deal of information, which can quickly become overwhelming. For information to be meaningful and useful to participants, it must be condensed and synthesized into its most salient themes. This work of making connections helps members feel supported and focused in their work. During discussions, it is therefore important to help people see how seemingly disparate ideas are in fact connected. This synthesis can help tease out promising ideas from research studies, prior experiences, or analysis of student data. It can also bring satisfying closure to a far-reaching conversation by lending clarity about what the group has decided to do next. To effectively connect ideas:

- \* **Anticipate** three to five key themes before entering into a discussion with participants, especially when sharing information or asking them to synthesize ideas. For instance, if you expect a discussion involving sample attendance outreach practices to generate insights about the gaps for this kind of support, arrive at the discussion prepared to discuss those issues in particular with participants.
- \* **Highlight** connections among ideas visually during conversations. Related ideas will arise through the course of conversation touching on the themes



### See this concept in action:

*Brainstorm examples from your own experience ahead of time to provide concrete guidance. See an example in the [Facilitator Guide from Strength-Based Culture Session 2: Strength-Based Practices for Communication](#).*



you had already identified or on themes you recognize in the moment. As you take notes in a group discussion, use colors or lines to connect these ideas. For instance, if multiple people provide examples of assessment questions that test students' higher-order thinking, write those examples with the same color marker. If several ideas relate to designing a learning environment that builds a belonging mindset, link these points with arrows or lines. Or if multiple ideas tie to a school-wide priority, highlight that priority and show the connections visually.

- \* **Rephrase** related ideas to highlight connections to one another and to larger concepts. It is hard to predict exactly where ideas will connect, but if you continually ask yourself whether a new idea fits into one of the key themes you had anticipated, you can be better prepared. Sometimes this is clear the moment a new idea is raised, and you can maintain focus by restating the idea with language that shows the connection. It also helps to be patient. Don't connect the dots the moment each dot comes up. Instead, listen for inklings of promising ideas that relate to larger concepts. In this way you become a curator of ideas: reframing, renaming, and connecting ideas in a way that helps people see their value and relationship to the larger principles.
- \* **Synthesize** ideas in writing. When writing up ideas to share with a school, whether in the form of notes after a discussion or documents based on prior work, identify the three to five key points that arose. These may be the themes you anticipated or important ideas you did not expect to arise. Then, ask yourself how these key points relate to each other and how you can convey those relationships in your notes or other follow-up documents. As you write notes, organize information to fit into these ideas or themes, rather than chronologically listing out information recorded.
- \* **Explain.** Finding connections inevitably means highlighting some ideas more than others. However, when this involves determining how best to proceed or put ideas into action, ensure that you are not rejecting an idea merely because it deviates from an initial plan, but because there is a real reason it does not fit as effectively. Share and confirm your reasoning respectfully with the group and one-on-one with individuals who may be particularly concerned.

## Skill 5: Sustain

In essence, a school improvement team is a group of human beings all trying to do something better together. Recognizing, caring about, and supporting the personal side of collective learning is a skill unto itself. When a team meets to develop ideas to support their students, each member of that team brings with them a set of experiences and culture. As you facilitate the group's learning, how you develop an awareness of individuals' stories, cultures, and relationships to one another and the work, and then return to those connections meaningfully, can help you deepen the team's engagement and collective efficacy over time. The process of effectively sustaining a group involves **four key aspects**:



- \* **Find at least one moment in each session to explicitly show integrity and care** for both the educators in the group and the students they serve. A big part of the process of school improvement is keeping a keen eye on the ultimate purpose of the work—will the practice you are developing truly help students? But it is also important to remember that all decisions in education are value-laden. Educators may have different ideas about what is most important for students to learn to be successful within and beyond high school. When facilitating conversations, keep these ideas alive and return to them as a way of norming on values so that over the course of the work together, participants can feel a sense of connection to the ultimate purpose.
- \* **Seek to understand the perspectives, identities, and experiences of each team member and how they bring strengths to the team.** Each educator brings their own personal experiences—shaped by their own learning, growth, and values—with them to their work with colleagues. Drawing on these unique perspectives can enhance group learning and decision making over time, but it requires creating a space for those educators to bring their varying perspectives to the group. Make it comfortable for people to share their perspectives without singling them out. Include prompts to allow participants to reflect in writing about their own experiences with topics before asking them to share in pairs or small groups.
- \* **Be aware of participation levels.** Because group discussions are dynamic and complex, it can be challenging to keep track of the engagement of everyone on the team. However, a group's ultimate success is reliant on the buy-in and involvement of each individual member. Notice if anyone seems more withdrawn or not participating as much. There could be a multitude of reasons for disengagement—an issue external to the meeting, introversion, lack of connection or experience on the topic. However, there could be other team dynamics at play. Keep an eye out for patterns connected to race or gender identity. Ask yourself: Who is doing most of the talking? How can I bring more voices into the discussion? Consider structuring discussions differently to foster equitable participation. Strategically form paired or small-group discussions rather than consistently relying on whole-group discussion. Check in on individuals in a private way that allows them to talk to you about something bothering them before bringing it to the whole group.
- \* **Debrief the process with the team.** When you agree on norms and process goals (i.e., how you want to work together) with your team at the start of your work together, you are creating a foundation that you can use to gauge and monitor the group's teamwork. At the end of a session, debrief with the group, asking, "How did we do with our norms today?" Make an effort to ask for feedback on the structures you have set up and your facilitation to show that you care about developing and sustaining the team's process of working together as much as the practice or tool they are designing together.





## Reflection and Planning

What does it mean to put these skills—listening, questioning, connecting, engaging, and sustaining—into action? When facilitating a session with a team of educators working on an improvement project, any number of challenges can arise. Participants may disagree with one another, disengage from conversation, or have trouble coming to a decision. In these moments, it is often up to the facilitator to use his or her skills to employ the right facilitation move at the right time and help the team get past the obstacle. For instance, if a team member shares an idea that you worry might not relate to those objectives, but might be something she is highly concerned about, use a questioning move by asking her to say more about the reasons behind her thinking. If you notice that the same people have been dominating most of the all-group discussions, use a sustaining move by incorporating time for individual writing or paired discussion before opening up to a full group.

### Challenge Scenarios

In the linked videos, we spoke with Eskolta facilitators about three common challenges that they have experienced in working with school teams. The facilitators shared the way they thought about the challenge in the moment and the facilitation moves they used in response. Because each facilitator develops his or her own unique style and preferences, we encourage you to use the reflection questions as you watch the videos to think about what resonates with you or how you might address the challenge differently.



## Challenge #1: Building Buy-In from Your Team

A facilitator is guiding a team to develop student discussion practices. Each time the team gathers to reflect on their progress, team members report not using the practice. The facilitator suspects that forward progress is stalling because the goals of a project or session are not in line with participants' values or current capacity. What do you do as a facilitator when you sense that participants' concerns and the project's goals are out of alignment?

 Paired Video:

[Developing Facilitator Moves: Building Buy-In From Team Members](#)



### If you notice...



Participants are not trying practices or ideas they agreed to at the last meeting

### Ask yourself...



"Is there something in the way that I don't know about yet?"

### Consider these facilitator moves...



- \* Slow down to be curious about concerns and obstacles
- \* Ask clarifying questions to encourage elaboration and reflection

## Reflection Questions:

1. What other facilitation moves could you use in this scenario to uncover the obstacles in the way?
2. Thinking about your work with your own team, what are the right moments to uncover individuals' goals and values? When can you carve out opportunities to return to the team's goals and create space to reflect on how individual values and goals connect to these?



## Challenge #2: Synthesizing Diverse Ideas

A team has been exploring deep and complex ideas about how to re-engage students who have not been coming to school. During their brainstorm, they come up with a diverse set of ideas of practices to try in their classrooms, but they are having trouble figuring out which are going to be the most promising. They look to their facilitator to help them make sense of these ideas without hurting anyone's feelings. What can you do to help a team move forward after generating many disparate ideas?

 Paired Video:

[Developing Facilitator Moves: Synthesizing Diverse Ideas](#)



### If you notice...



A team has generated many disparate ideas and is having a hard time figuring out which are going to be the most promising ones.

### Ask yourself...



"What can I say or do that will help me actively listen to what people are saying and connect them to other ideas and the bigger picture?"

### Consider these facilitator moves...



- \* Let people generate ideas, then put a label on those ideas
- \* Use examples to push for specifics
- \* Highlight promising ideas by anchoring in the objective
- \* Follow up to develop a focus

## Reflection Questions:

1. What other brainstorming techniques have you tried with teams in the past? Are there particular techniques or prompts that you have seen help teams generate many ideas but maintain a focus?
2. What other facilitation moves could you use to bring focus to a wide-ranging discussion? Are there team dynamics that would change the way you would think about which to use?



## Challenge #3: Helping All Team Members Participate

A facilitator asks questions to draw out ideas, but most team members are silent, and the same one or two participants respond each time. It is unclear why the conversation is dominated by just two participants and in what ways this may be affecting not only the quality of the ideas, but also the likelihood of broader improvement and implementation over time. In this situation, adjustments like offering incentives, sharing motivational messages, or introducing accountability structures may marginally increase compliance, but addressing the root causes is essential for generating authentic engagement. What can you do as a facilitator when people are not participating in discussion?

 Paired Video:

[Developing Facilitator Moves: Helping All Team Members Participate](#)



### If you notice...



Group members are not participating, or one tends to dominate airtime.

### Ask yourself...



How can I constructively ensure that multiple perspectives are enriching the discussions, and that team members are willing and eager to move from ideas to implementation?

### Consider these facilitator moves...



- \* Use paired or small group discussions
- \* Co-create and return to norms to make space for all members to voice ideas
- \* Make time to discuss how the agenda aligns with other priorities

## Reflection Questions:

1. When facilitating a group meeting, what do you typically look for to determine if there are uneven patterns of engagement?
2. What kinds of discussion structures have you experienced either as a participant that have been most engaging and that you could use as a facilitator?



## Further Exploration

If you want to ...	Take a look at...
Understand the principles behind effective facilitation of school improvement	<a href="#">Methods for Facilitation Guide 1:</a> <a href="#">Principles: Facilitation for Transformation</a>
Practice facilitations skills and get feedback from observers	The Facilitation Feedback Checklist