

FACILITATE CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER

PURPOSE

The information on this flyer supports implementation researchers to notice, name, and choose facilitation moves that foster safety, inclusion, and meaningful dialogue. It emphasises relational awareness, not “competence as performance”.

CONTRIBUTORS

Content is based on the workshop delivered for GACD in May 2026 by [Ruth Verhey](#) and [Bindu Patel](#).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



CONSIDER HOW CULTURE INTERACTS WITH GROUP DYNAMICS

As a facilitator, culture is a lens we look through, not something to “tick off” a list. When it comes to culture and group dynamics, ask yourself: “Whose norms are being centred here?”



UNDERSTAND YOUR DEFAULT PREFERENCES

By recognising and describing our default facilitation patterns as dynamic tensions rather than fixed approaches, we have the opportunity to move skillfully along each spectrum in response to purpose, context, and group needs.



INTERVENE WITH INTENTION

Facilitators choose how to intervene in group discussion depending on the context and their observations. The intervention they choose will be influenced by the group’s needs, the emotional risk level, and trade-offs against alternative interventions.



REFLECT ON HOW YOU FACILITATE

Honest self-reflection helps facilitators surface their own assumptions and biases, strengthen awareness of power and positionality, and adapt to complex, emergent group dynamics.

Get to the heart of facilitation

Take a moment, breathe in, and think back to the last time you facilitated a meeting, a workshop, or a focus group. Did you enter into the situation seeing facilitation as a relational practice, or a performance to “get right”?

At its heart, meaningful group conversations are shaped by care: by how facilitators notice power, respond to silence, welcome different

forms of participation, and decide when to offer structure and when to let something unfold.

Rather than searching for one perfect response, you are encouraged to stay curious, reflective, and intentional – making choices that support both psychological safety and honest, stretching conversation.

Reflect on your next discussion



REFLECTIVE
PRACTICE

Throughout this section, this icon will indicate an invitation to reflect on your own facilitation norms, practices, and experiences.

Reflective practice helps facilitators improve quality, rigour, and ethics - whether that is in meetings, workshops, or focus groups. It surfaces personal assumptions and biases, strengthens awareness of positionality, and supports adaption to group dynamics.

Be aware of culture in group dynamics

As a facilitator, culture is a lens we look through, not something to “tick off” a list. Western methodologies tend to dominate but they are just one option among many. When it comes to culture and group dynamics, ask yourself: “Whose norms are being centred here?”

In this flyer, we note some overarching ideas in the context of broad cultural differences. Although presented as binaries, there are many shades of grey. Indeed, they might also be applicable on a micro or meso scale – such as within or between project teams, within or between communities, or between individuals.

INDIVIDUAL VS GROUP AGENCY SHAPES PARTICIPATION

Research shows individualism within a culture strongly correlates with conversational assertiveness and decision-making autonomy.

- Individualist cultures tend to encourage personal opinions and direct contributions.
- Collectivist cultures tend to emphasise

group harmony and may avoid open disagreement.

POWER DISTANCE INFLUENCES AUTHORITY RELATIONS

Leadership-voice studies find willingness to challenge a manager varies up to five-times across cultures.

- High-power-distance cultures tend to defer to hierarchy and junior members may not challenge leaders.
- Low-power-distance cultures tend to expect leaders to be facilitators, not directors.

DIRECTNESS CAN INFLUENCE (MIS)-UNDERSTANDINGS

High-context vs. low-context frameworks (Hall) predict misunderstandings in multicultural teams.

- Direct communicators value clarity and explicit meaning and are more common in low-context cultures.

- Indirect communicators convey meaning through context, tone, and relationship cues and are more common in high-context cultures.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS TIME AFFECT COLLABORATION

Studies show polychronic teams perceive rigid scheduling as inflexible; monochronic teams see fluidity as disorganisation.

- Monochronic cultures focus on deadlines, linear planning, and punctuality.
- Polychronic cultures work fluidly and juggle multiple tasks.

CONFLICT NORMS VARY WIDELY

Cross-cultural conflict research indicates visible disagreement is seen as constructive in some cultures and threatening in others.

- Task-focused conflict is acceptable in many so-called Western cultures ("challenge ideas, not people").
- Relationship-sensitive cultures avoid open conflict and use mediation or private channels.

FURTHER READING

Hofstede G. (2001) *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations*. Sage Publications.

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House R, Hanges P, Javidan M, Dorfman P and Gupta V. (2004) *Culture, Leadership, and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies*. Sage.

Morrison EW. (2011) "Employee Voice Behavior: Integration and Directions for Future Research." *Academy of Management Annals*, 5(1), 373–412.

Botero IC and Van Dyne L. (2009) "Employee Voice Behavior: Interactive Effects of LMX and Power Distance." *Academy of Management Journal*, 52(2), 318–339.

Hall ET. (1976) *Beyond Culture*. Anchor Books.

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Hall ET and Hall MR. (1990) *Understanding Cultural Differences*. Intercultural Press.

Bluedorn AC, Kalliath TJ, Strube MJ and Martin GD. (1999) "Polychronicity and the Inventory of Polychronic Values (IPV)." *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 14(3/4), 205–230.

Ting Toomey S. (1988) "Intercultural Conflict Styles." In *Theories in Intercultural Communication*. Sage.

Leung K and Cohen D. (2011) *Cultural Diversity and Conflict*. In *Conflict, Negotiation, and Development* (APA).



REFLECTIVE
PRACTICE

Use the prompt questions below to reflect on your own cultural norms. What is normal to you? How is that the same or different in other contexts?

What does "consensus" mean to you – everyone agrees, everyone can live with the decision, or something else?

What counts as polite communication in your culture and what counts as rude?

How comfortable are you with open disagreement? What counts as a disagreement for you?

When someone says "That's interesting..." what does it usually mean to you?

Recognise your personal patterns

These continua offer a practical lens for reflecting on facilitation. Rather than fixed positions, they describe dynamic tensions to navigate in real time, shaping how groups think, relate, and make decisions.

Effective facilitation is not about choosing one end over the other, but about moving skilfully along each spectrum in response to purpose, context, and group needs.

NEUTRALITY

The facilitator does not take a substantive position in the group's content and has no decision making authority, maintaining objectivity and separation.

PARTICIPATORY LEADERSHIP

Blends decisive leadership with empowering, listening and engaging practices, actively contributing to content and decision-making. Builds the group's capacity to "think together".

STRUCTURE

Relates to planned agendas, predefined steps, and deliberate sequencing providing clarity and reducing ambiguity.

EMERGENCE

Relates to dynamics, tensions, and patterns arising spontaneously; responding to what emerges in the group.

HOLDING SPACE

Presence, witnessing, containment, and non-interference. Creating a safe environment and supporting the other person's process.

DIRECTING

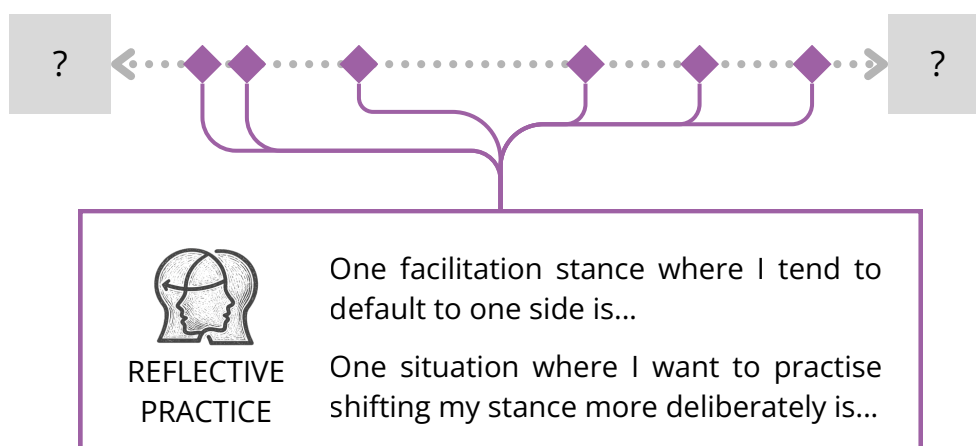
Actively guiding the group's process, determining interventions, and shaping the conversation through structured moves.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

The participants' belief that one can speak up, take risks, and express ideas without fear of judgement or negative consequences.

PRODUCTIVE DISCOMFORT

Healthy tension, challenge, and interpersonal risk that enables insight or transformation – growth requires uncertainty.



Recognising different patterns - in action.

Read through the two facilitator opening scripts below. Which option would you instinctively gravitate towards and why? Which opening better serves the group if there is a very tight deadline? What about if there were lots of unvoiced tensions?

Neither one is "correct" - both have merits and limitations.

One's facilitation stance is contextual, ethical, and dynamic, not fixed. Experienced facilitators don't follow set rules – they make choices. You may find that you tend to "anchor" towards one side but the most skilled facilitators have range. Such flexibility is a practice, not a personality trait.

FACILITATOR A

"Good morning everyone and thank you for being here.

Our aim today is to review the first 12 months of the gestational diabetes outreach programme and agree on concrete adaptations for the next phase.

We have a tight 90 minutes, so I'll keep us closely to time. The agenda is structured in three parts:

1. Review of key findings
2. Identification of priority challenges
3. Agreement on next steps

My role today is to guide the process and make sure we hear a range of perspectives while staying focused on outcomes. I won't be contributing content, but I may step in to clarify, summarise, or move us on.

We will begin with the data, then open the floor for reflections. I will invite speakers rather than open discussion at first, so we can surface different viewpoints without interruption."

Notes on Facilitator A's position along the continua:

Structure ↔ Emergence

Holding space ↔ **Directing**

Neutrality ↔ Participatory leadership

Psychological safety ↔ Productive discomfort

(Safety via clarity and containment)

Through this approach, Facilitator A demonstrates:

- Containment.
- Predictability and efficiency.
- Positioned as process controller.
- Safety created through rules and structure, not relational risk.

FACILITATOR B

"Before we dive in, I want to acknowledge that this programme sits at the intersection of research, community experience, and institutional responsibility – and those can pull us in different directions.

I'm holding a loose plan for today, but I expect it may shift depending on what feels most important to the group. If at any point you feel something essential isn't being said – or isn't landing – I invite you to name that.

Rather than starting with updates, I would like to begin with a question for everyone: What feels most alive or unresolved for you right now in this programme?

We will take a moment in silence, then I will invite a few voices. I am especially interested in hearing perspectives we don't usually start with."

Notes on Facilitator B's position along the continua:

Structure ↔ **Emergence**

Holding space ↔ Directing

Neutrality ↔ **Participatory leadership**

Psychological safety ↔ Productive discomfort

(Safety through relationship but with room for tension)

Through this approach, Facilitator B demonstrates:

- Shared ownership of the process.
- Relational and emotional attunement.
- Willingness to sit with uncertainty.
- Safety created through invitation and transparency, not control.

Intervene with intention

Facilitators choose how to intervene in group discussion and emerging dynamics depending on the context and their observations. Typically, there will be many options that are viable next steps and no 'one perfect solution'.

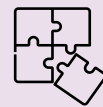
The intervention cards shown here represent general approaches that a facilitator might use and are not exhaustive.

EQUALISE AIRTIME



Actively rebalance who is speaking to allow equal contribution from all participants.

INVITE OTHER PERSPECTIVES



Make space for missing, marginalised, or dissenting views.

GENTLY REDIRECT



Bring the conversation back to the topic, task, or purpose.

NAME WHAT'S PRESENT



Bring unspoken emotion or tension into the room.

ASK A META-QUESTION



Shift attention from *what* is being said to *how* the conversation is happening.

REFRAME



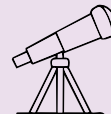
Offer a different way of seeing the issue.

SLOW OR PAUSE



Reduce the pace or intensity to support thinking and regulation.

ZOOM IN / OUT



Move between detail and the bigger picture to unblock progress.

WILD CARD



There is almost always another option...

IN THE MOMENT, ASK YOURSELF...

- What is happening in the group right now?
- What does the group need most - focus, inclusion, or momentum?
- Which intervention will best support that need?
- What is the risk if I intervene (or don't)?

The most important point is to choose with intention - not defaulting to what is comfortable to you or 'what you usually do'.

EXAMPLES

If one voice dominates → **EQUALISE AIRTIME**

If some perspectives are missing → **INVITE OTHER PERSPECTIVES**

If discussion goes off track → **GENTLY REDIRECT**

If something important is unspoken → **NAME WHAT'S PRESENT**

If the group is focused on content but not process → **ASK A META-QUESTION**

If the group is stuck in one way of thinking → **REFRAME**

If the pace is too fast or reactive → **SLOW OR PAUSE**

If the group is lost in detail or too abstract → **ZOOM IN / OUT**

If nothing seems to shift the conversation → **WILD CARD**



REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

One facilitation intervention I want to be more intentional about choosing is...

And the trade-off I will pay attention to when using it is...

Address common challenges

Techniques, tools, and tips for common challenges shared by workshop participants are summarised on the following pages.

As facilitation experience builds, certain challenges raised in a group context become familiar.

OVER-PARTICIPATION

One or two individuals dominate the discussion, limiting space for others to contribute and reducing diversity of perspectives.

UNDER-PARTICIPATION

Some participants remain quiet or disengaged, meaning valuable insights and experiences are not shared with the group.

SCEPTICISM AND DISRUPTION

Participants challenge the process or topic in unproductive ways, which can derail discussion and affect group dynamics.



REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

One group pattern I want to notice more intentionally is... (e.g. *silence, who speaks first, emotional tone, whose norms dominate*)

and when I notice it, an intervention I could try is...

OFF-TOPIC

Discussion drifts away from the main objective, using valuable time without contributing to the intended outcomes.

DISAGREEMENT AND NO CONSENSUS

Strong differing views prevent agreement, making it difficult to move forward or reach shared conclusions.

GROUPTHINK

Participants conform too quickly to a dominant view, limiting critical thinking and reducing the quality of decisions.

SMALLER THAN EXPECTED GROUPS

Lower attendance reduces the range of perspectives and may require adapting activities or facilitation style.

'HOW WE GATHER'

This new resource consists of questions for facilitators designing group spaces, particularly in research. It does not list 'best practices', instead it emphasises the relational and ethical considerations of seemingly benign logistical choices.



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GACD is the working name for GACD Action, a Charitable Incorporated Organisation registered by the Charity Commission for England and Wales (Charity no. 1174867).

Facilitate conversations that matter: **Crowd-sourced tools, techniques, and tips for common challenges**

The challenge	Tools, techniques, and tips for the workshop / meeting / focus group		
	Before	At the beginning	During
Over-participation	- Design activities to support balanced participation. - Use structured opening questions that invite brief responses from everyone. - Build turn-taking into the session plan. - Think carefully about the invitation list, especially where authority or seniority may shape whose voices are centred. - If you know someone may dominate airtime, give them a brief opportunity to speak early so the main discussion can stay balanced.	- Set a clear group norm that everyone should have space to contribute. - Let participants know you may step in at times to help balance airtime. - Moderate actively and kindly to maintain participation balance. - Frame shared airtime as a sign of respect for everyone in the room.	- Thank the participant for their contribution and invite others to come in. - Ask, "Who would you like to hear from next?" to encourage shared facilitation. - Pair or group participants in ways that help balance different communication styles. - Gently ask frequent speakers to pause so others can contribute first. - If needed, kindly interrupt, acknowledge the point, and invite another participant to respond.
Under-participation	- Identify who may need more support to participate, and plan inclusive ways for everyone to contribute. - Prepare concise, low-stakes opening questions. - Review any sensitive or unfamiliar terms so you can use accessible language. - Plan a light, welcoming opener to help build psychological safety. - Think ahead about how you will invite quieter participants into the conversation.	- Start by inviting quieter participants in with gentle, direct prompts. - Use open prompts that invite fuller responses rather than yes-or-no answers. - Create a clearly safe and welcoming atmosphere. - Reassure the group that there are no right or wrong answers and that all ideas are welcome. - Use introductions or icebreakers to help participants find their voice early. - Set the expectation from the start that interaction is encouraged.	- Use supportive verbal prompts to encourage participation. - Ask open but specific follow-up questions such as, "Can you tell me a bit more about that experience?" - Remind the group that every perspective is valued. - Allow a few seconds of silence without rushing to fill it. - Offer different ways to contribute, such as speaking or writing.
Skeptical and disruptive participants	- Plan an opening activity that is positive and grounding. - Share a clear purpose for the discussion or meeting. - Acknowledge that participants may bring different views, and make space for respectful listening.	- Set expectations for mutual respect and explain the purpose of the parking lot. - Be clear about what the session can and cannot achieve. - Use community agreements, and if helpful, read them aloud together.	- Acknowledge the concern behind the comment without letting it derail the group. - Invite the participant in by saying, for example, "I hear your concern, and I want to make sure we capture it." - Record important concerns so participants feel heard while the session stays on track.

The challenge	Tools, techniques, and tips for the workshop / meeting / focus group		
	Before	At the beginning	During
Off-topic discussion	- Set clear boundaries around time and topic. - Prepare an agenda or guiding questions and share them in advance where possible. - Plan how you will gently recast discussion back to the main focus.	- Remind the group of the available time. - Set expectations that you may gently guide the conversation back if it drifts. - Allocate speaking time when needed.	- Acknowledge the value of the point, then reconnect it to the session goal. - Call people in rather than out by gently asking how their point connects to the topic. - Use time-management cues such as, "In the interest of time..."
Disagreement and no consensus	- Plan ahead for contentious issues, including how you will use a parking lot. - Anticipate likely areas of disagreement. - Frame the goal as gathering a rich range of ideas, not forcing immediate agreement. - Clarify what "consensus" means for this group.	- Introduce the parking lot, explain why it matters, and keep it visible. - Remind the room that differing experiences are valuable data. - Invite everyone to listen respectfully, even when they disagree.	- Ask participants what outcomes they hope to see from the meeting. - Revisit the parking lot at natural pauses to check what has been addressed. - Normalize different perspectives and guide the group toward shared understanding where possible.
Groupthink	- Identify where group familiarity or existing dynamics may limit diverse thinking. - Where helpful, mix groups so people are not only working with those they already know well.	- Actively invite a range of views and make them visible to the group. - Request counter-perspectives early, for example: "Please be honest, even if your experience differs from the room."	- Invite the group to consider both strengths and limitations of each option. - Probe deliberately with questions like, "Has anyone experienced a situation where this approach did not work?" - Intentionally invite quieter members to respond early. - Gently introduce contrasting ideas to broaden reflection.
Smaller than expected groups (no-shows and late cancellations)	- Send reminders and confirm attendance in advance. - Check for practical barriers such as travel, access, or costs where relevant. - Prepare a backup version of the session for fewer participants. - Build a flexible agenda that works for both larger and smaller groups. - Reframe questions if needed to suit a more conversational format.	- Reassure the group that the session is still worthwhile. - Highlight the advantages of a smaller group, such as deeper discussion. - Adapt the format if needed, for example by keeping the activity in plenary rather than using breakouts. - If appropriate and feasible, consider whether rescheduling would better support the purpose of the session. - Set positive expectations by framing the smaller group as an opportunity for richer conversation.	- Keep everyone actively engaged. - Remind participants how the session outcomes will be used. - Reinforce that the discussion remains valid and valuable. - Check whether participants would be open to a follow-up session with a wider group. - Use the smaller size as an opportunity for deeper, more iterative discussion. - Adjust planned activities as needed to suit the group size.