



Plenary Council 2020

What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?

FACILITATION SKILLS

Provided by Rhyannon Elliott
Relationship Education Programs
CatholicCare

Plenary Council 2020: Listening and Dialogue Sessions

FACILITATION SKILLS

The role of a facilitator is to guide a process. In most cases this will mean being outside the process, being able to maintain objectivity and keep the participants on track to achieve the intended aims.

We're going to break down the facilitator's role into Beginning, Middle and End. But good facilitation starts before the beginning of the session.

A good facilitator is well-prepared, and a helpful exercise for any facilitator is to imagine how your session might run – the people and personalities that may be present in the room, the issues, comments and concerns that may arise. A good facilitator is aware of their own views, values and red buttons (or triggers) and can manage their own response whilst keeping the group safe. Red buttons are anything (comments, body language, tone) that cause a negative reaction in us.

When planning your session, ask yourself "What are my red buttons and how will I manage these while facilitating the group?" The facilitator's objectivity is crucial, especially when the aim of the session is open, honest sharing.

As a facilitator you need to be able to do three things:

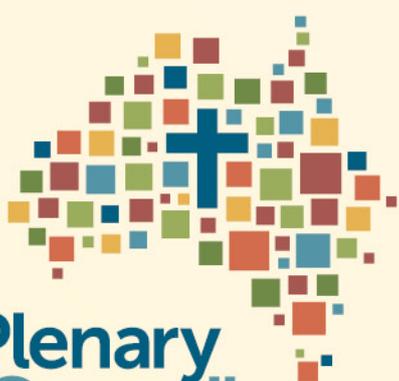
1. Engage and continue to engage the group
2. Manage the group
3. Know how to close the group

Engaging the group

Engaging the group actually starts in the planning stage with the space you choose. Your space needs to be warm as does the welcome – participants need to feel comfortable in the group so make sure there are name tags and that everyone is greeted warmly as they arrive. Consider having some refreshments to share during your session; research has shown that participants are much less anxious when they have a hot drink in their hands! Your group may feel nervous and it's the facilitator's role to reduce stress- your welcome goes a long way in achieving this. You could also consider a quick warm- up activity or "get-to-know-you" activity. It's easy to write these elements off as "a waste of time" but settling the group into the space builds their trust in you, bonds them as a group and increases their ability to be open and honest which can lead to a more productive (and less disruptive) session.

The next part of the "beginning" is to explain the purpose of the session and get some quick feedback from the group about what they think the session is about and what outcomes they hope to achieve- this adds structure (which can be very important for some participants) and allows you, as facilitator, to establish some group rules.





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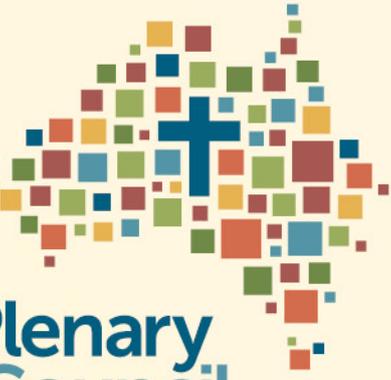
These rules may come in very handy during your session if it comes to managing tricky behaviour – but more on that soon. The rules can be around respectful, non-judgemental listening, whole group participation, confidentiality and safety. It's worth mentioning here people's relationship with their faith and with the Church can sometimes be a very complicated and sensitive thing. Being invited to reflect can bring up feelings and emotions either during the session or afterwards and it would be wise, when setting the scene for the session, to provide some avenues for support should your participants have need. The Archdiocese of Melbourne (Sr Kath Tierney, 9926 5680) and CatholicCare (9287 5555) are two good places to seek assistance should the need arise.

Let the group know the plans for the session including the timings, for example, "We're going to have some personal reflection time, some writing, then some feedback to the group. We'll work through until this time when we'll have a break then come back for more reflection and sharing then collating our responses." This adds to the safety of the group and will become useful when having to get the group back on task!

Managing the group

Managing the group means keeping the group on track to achieve your aims. The facilitator's role is to encourage the group to be as open and honest as possible. The Plenary listening process has time for reflection and writing and this is a good thing as it allows the participants to get their thoughts onto paper before being asked to share. As the participants share their thoughts, encourage them to go deeper by asking open ended questions such as, "Can you tell us more about that?" Again, the Plenary process has some great examples of these in "What have I experienced in this area?" and "How has another perspective influenced my own?"

Managing the group sometimes means managing tricky behaviour. It's worth thinking about some of the scenarios you might encounter beforehand. These may include noisy or chaotic discussion without a clear purpose, continual interruption or talking by one or more people, disagreement with or criticism of the process or even digressing from the process derailing the discussions. This is where the shared aims of the session and group rules can come in handy; drawing the group's attention back to these aims and to the rules can be a reminder of the purpose of the exercise and the need for respect in the space. Using the wisdom of the group can be helpful to manage critical or disruptive behaviour; "Let's hear from the group about this" might be something you'd say. For participants with lots to share, it can be worth saying something like, "I'm conscious of time and our need to give everyone a chance to speak so perhaps jot down some notes or even come to speak with me at the end and we can include them in the group response." If you feel the group is going off on a tangent – come back to the question you're asking.



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Keeping to time is an important part of the facilitation role, so make sure you check the clock throughout your session and, where necessary, move on to the next step in the process. This is where the time you spent setting the scene at the start of your session really comes in useful.

Closing the group

Closing the group well is a necessary element of good facilitation. In summarising the session and sharing about next steps, you are showing the group that their time has been well spent and how their responses will be used. Next steps may involve another session with the group, so you may talk about plans for this session. It's great to get some feedback from the group about their experience of the process – their thoughts and feelings – you could have a brief evaluation sheet or just jot down any answers from the group. This feedback helps you as a facilitator. It goes without saying that thanking the group and acknowledging their contribution is very important!

My last piece of advice is to plan and not to underestimate the importance of the beginning of your session. Your welcome, scene setting, goal setting and group rules can make the difference between a fantastic and a disastrous session so don't rush. Remember too that, as a facilitator you are also a role model. If you want the group to listen respectfully, share honestly and stay on track, you lead the way!