

## **Communication Skills: Facilitating Discussions**

### **Description**

Discussions are contexts in which learners can learn from each other. Through discussions, a synergetic effect can occur. That is, the result of the discussion is greater than the number of individuals who are involved in the discussion.

### **Learners**

Discussion often works best if participants have access to a common base of knowledge: that is, the discussion might extend the ideas in a common reading or discussion could be based on a topic familiar to learners.

### **Equipment**

Common readings, if relevant, or other sources such as video tapes or web sites. Additionally, discussion works best if participants are seated so they can see the faces of all other participants.

### **Facilitator**

The role of the facilitator is to ensure that all facets of the discussion topic are addressed. If the point of the discussion is decision making, is a decision made? If the purpose is problem solving, has the problem been solved? If the purpose is an exchange of knowledge or ideas, has that exchange occurred?

In addition, the facilitator must work to ensure that all participants enjoy an equal opportunity to participate and that some participants do not contribute more proportionally in comparison to other participants who wish to contribute.

### **Instructions**

1. The facilitator states the question or issue to be discussed. Necessary background information should be presented to prepare participants for the discussion.
2. If there are several questions to be discussed, allow 10-15 minutes for each.
3. During the discussion, these guides allow everyone to contribute:
  - a. Everyone speaks once before anyone speaks a second time.
  - b. Participants should listen to what is said before they speak. Repetition does not extend the discussion, but hitchhiking on others' statements can take the discussion in constructive directions.
  - c. To encourage participation:
    - (1) Focus on ideas, not people
    - (2) Encourage equal participation
    - (3) Incorporate periods of writing before discussion

- (4) Use round robin
- (5) Remind participants who stray from the topic about the goal
- (6) Emphasize comments that are relevant to the goal
- d. When discussion begins to lag, ask “Is there anything else you would like to say about \_\_\_\_\_ before we go on?”
- 4. The facilitator summarizes the major points and asks for group agreement that this is the result of the discussion.
- 5. Facilitator describes how the results will be used.

## **References**

Adler, R. B. , and Elmhorst, J. M. (1999). Effective meetings. *Communicating at work: Principles and practices for business and the professions* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.), pp. 260-284. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.