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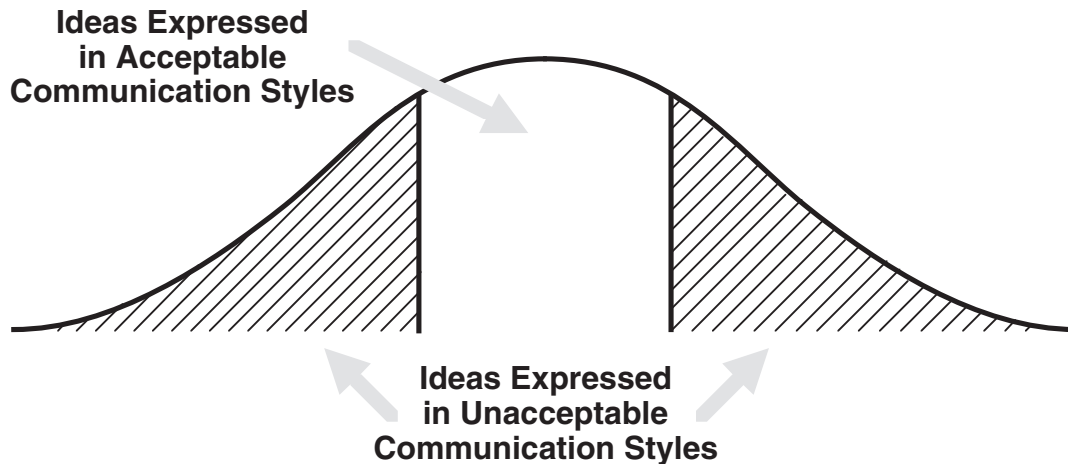
FACILITATIVE LISTENING SKILLS

TECHNIQUES FOR HONORING ALL POINTS OF VIEW

- ◆ Respecting Diverse Communication Styles
- ◆ Paraphrasing
- ◆ Drawing People Out
- ◆ Mirroring
- ◆ Gathering Ideas
- ◆ Stacking
- ◆ Tracking
- ◆ Encouraging
- ◆ Balancing
- ◆ Helping People Listen to Each Other
- ◆ Making Space for a Quiet Person
- ◆ Acknowledging Feelings
- ◆ Validating
- ◆ Empathizing
- ◆ Intentional Silence
- ◆ Linking
- ◆ Listening for the Logic
- ◆ Legitimizing Differences
- ◆ Listening for Common Ground
- ◆ Listening with a Point of View
- ◆ Summarizing

THE CALCULUS OF DIVERSITY

THE LIMITS OF TOLERANCE



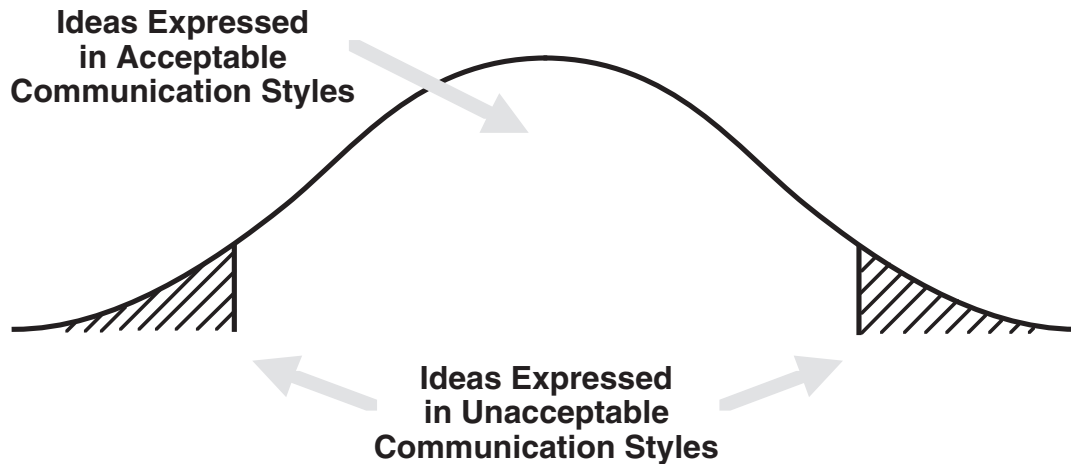
An idea that is expressed in an acceptable communication style will be taken more seriously by more people. Conversely, ideas that are presented poorly or offensively are harder for people to hear. For example:

- Many people become antsy when a speaker is repetitious.
- Group members can be impatient with shy or nervous members who speak haltingly.
- Others may not want to listen to exaggerations, distortions, or unfounded pronouncements.
- Some people become overwhelmed when a speaker goes on a tangent and raises a point that seems unrelated to the subject.
- And some people are profoundly uncomfortable with anyone who shows too much emotion.

In an ideal world, useful insights and ideas would be valued regardless of how they were expressed. But in the real world, when a speaker has an unpleasant communication style people just stop listening to the substance of the ideas being expressed – no matter how valuable those ideas might be.

THE CALCULUS OF DIVERSITY

STRETCHING
THE LIMITS



Groups that tolerate diverse communication styles can utilize more of the ideas put forth by its members than groups who need those ideas to be expressed in an “acceptable fashion.” By using good listening skills, a facilitator can be an excellent support to such groups. For example:

- When someone is being repetitious, a facilitator can use paraphrasing to help that person summarize his or her thinking.
- When someone is speaking haltingly, in awkward, broken sentences, a facilitator can help the speaker relax by drawing him or her out with open-ended, nondirective questions.
- When someone is exaggerating or distorting, a facilitator can validate the central point without quarreling over its accuracy.
- When someone goes off on a tangent, a facilitator can treat the speaker with full respect by asking the person to help everyone see how his or her point connects with the broader context.
- When someone expresses himself or herself with intense feeling, a facilitator can first acknowledge the emotion, then paraphrase the content of the thought to ensure that the speaker's point does not get lost amid the group's gut reactions to the feelings.

These situations demonstrate how important it is for a facilitator to listen skillfully and respectfully to *everyone*.

PARAPHRASING

WHY

- *Paraphrasing* is fundamental to active listening. It is the most straightforward way to demonstrate to a speaker that his or her thoughts were heard and understood.
- The power of *paraphrasing* is that it is nonjudgmental and, hence, validating. It enables people to feel that their ideas are respected and legitimate.
- *Paraphrasing* provides the speaker with a chance to hear how his or her ideas are being heard by others.
- *Paraphrasing* is especially useful on occasions when a speaker's statements are convoluted or confusing. At such times, it serves as a check for clarification, as in, "Is this what you mean?" followed by the paraphrase.
- In sum, *paraphrasing* is the tool of choice for supporting people to think out loud.

HOW

- In your own words, say what you think the speaker said.
- If the speaker's statement contains one or two sentences, use roughly the same number of words when you paraphrase.
- If the speaker's statement contains many sentences, summarize it.
- To strengthen the group's trust in your objectivity, occasionally preface your paraphrase with a comment like one of these:
 - "It sounds like you're saying . . ."
 - "Let me see if I'm understanding you . . ."
 - "Is this what you mean?"
- When you have completed the paraphrase, look for the speaker's reaction. Say something like, "Did I get it?" Verbally or nonverbally, the speaker will indicate whether s/he feels understood. If not, *keep asking for clarification until you understand what s/he meant.*

DRAWING PEOPLE OUT

WHY

- *Drawing people out* is the skill that helps participants clarify, develop and refine their ideas without coaching or intrusion.
- It's common to ask a speaker directive questions, such as "What is your goal?" or "How long will it take?" or "How can you fix that problem?" Directive questions like these are often useful, but they work by pointing the speaker in the direction that the questioner thinks would be helpful. This interrupts the speaker's own train of thought, which can be problematic when the speaker is still formulating his/her own point of view.
- By contrast, open-ended, non-directive questions help the speaker – rather than the asker – do the thinking.
- *Drawing people out* sends this message: "I'm with you; I understand you so far. Now tell me more." This message supports people to think in more depth, and to say more of what they're thinking.

HOW

- First paraphrase the speaker's statement, then ask open-ended, nondirective questions.

Here are some examples:

- "Can you say more about that?"
- "What do you mean by . . . ?"
- "What's coming up for you now?"
- "How so?"
- "What else can you tell me . . . ?"
- "How is that working for you?"
- "What matters to you about that?"
- "Tell me more."
- "Can you give me an example?"
- "What's your thinking about that?"
- Here is a less common method that also works well. First, paraphrase the speaker's statement; then use *a connector* such as, "So . . ." or "And . . ." or "Because . . ." For example, "You're saying to wait six more weeks before we sign the contract, because . . . ?"

MIRRORING

WHY

- *Mirroring* is a highly structured, formal version of *paraphrasing*, in which the facilitator repeats the speaker's words verbatim. This lets the speaker hear exactly what s/he just said.
- Some people experience *paraphrasing* as veiled criticism. For them, *mirroring* is evidence of the facilitator's neutrality.
- Newly formed groups and groups unfamiliar with using a facilitator often benefit from the trust-building effects of *mirroring*.
- *Mirroring* speeds up the tempo of a slow-moving discussion. Thus, it is the *tool of choice* when facilitating a brainstorming process.
- In general, the more a facilitator feels the need to establish neutrality, the more frequently he or she should *mirror* rather than paraphrase.

HOW

- If the speaker has said a single sentence, repeat it back verbatim – in the speaker's own words.
- If the speaker has said more than one sentence, repeat back key words or phrases.
- In either case, *use the speaker's words, not your words*.
- The one exception is when the speaker says, "I." Then, change the pronoun to "you."
- Mirroring the speaker's words and mirroring the speaker's tone of voice are *two different things*. You want your tone of voice to remain warm and accepting, regardless of what the speaker's voice sounds like.
- Be yourself with your gestures and tone of voice; don't be wooden or phony. Remember, a key purpose of *mirroring* is building trust.

GATHERING IDEAS

WHY

- *Gathering* is the listening skill that helps participants build a list of ideas at a fast-moving pace.
- *Gathering* combines *mirroring* and *paraphrasing* – the reflective listening skills – with physical gestures. Taking a few steps to and fro, or making hand or arm motions, are physical gestures that serve as energy boosters. Such gestures help people stay engaged.
- When *gathering*, be sure to mirror more frequently than you paraphrase. This establishes a lively yet comfortable tempo that is easy for most participants to follow. Many people quickly move into a rhythm of expressing their ideas in short phrases – typically three to five words per idea. These phrases are much easier to record on flipcharts than long sentences.

HOW

- Effective *gathering* starts with a concise description of the task. For example, “For the next ten minutes please unpack this proposal by calling out all the areas that might warrant further discussion. I’d like to gather up all the ideas first, so we can see the full range of issues before we get specific.”
- If it’s the group’s first time listing ideas, spend a little time teaching them *suspended judgment*. Example: “For this next activity, I’d like everyone to feel free to express their ideas, even the offbeat or unpopular ones. So please let this be a time for generating ideas, not judging them. The discussion can come as soon as you finish making the list.”
- Now have the group begin. As members call out their items, mirror or paraphrase whatever is said.
- Honor all points of view. If someone says something that sounds off the wall, just mirror it and keep moving.

STACKING

WHY

- *Stacking* is a procedure for helping people take turns when several people want to speak at once.
- *Stacking* lets everyone know that they are, in fact, going to have their turn to speak. So instead of competing for airtime, people are free to listen without distraction.
- In contrast, when people don't know when or even whether their turn will come, they can't help but vie for position. This leads to various expressions of impatience and disrespect, especially interruptions.
- Facilitators who do not stack have to pay attention to the waving of hands and other nonverbal messages that say, "I'd like to speak, please." Inevitably, some members are skipped or ignored. With *stacking*, a facilitator creates a sequence that includes all those who want to speak.

HOW

- *Stacking* is a four-step procedure. First, the facilitator asks those who want to speak to raise their hands. Second, s/he creates a speaking order by assigning a number to each person. Third, s/he calls on people when their turn to speak arrives. Fourth, after the final speaker, the facilitator asks if anyone else wants to speak. If so, the facilitator starts another stack. Here's a demonstration:
- Step 1. "Would all who want to speak, please raise your hands."
- Step 2. "James, you're first. Deb, you're second. Tyrone, you're third."
- Step 3. [*When James has finished*] "Who was second? Was it you, Deb? Okay, go ahead."
- Step 4. [*After the last person has spoken*] "Who'd like to speak now? Are there any more comments?" Then, start a new stack, and repeat Step 2 through Step 4.

TRACKING

WHY

- *Tracking* means keeping track of the various lines of thought that are going on simultaneously within a single discussion.
- For example, suppose a group is discussing a plan to hire a new employee. Assume that two people are talking about roles and responsibilities. Two others are discussing financial implications. And two more are reviewing their experiences with the previous employee. In such cases, people need help keeping track of all that's going on, because they are focused primarily on clarifying their own ideas.
- People often act as though the particular issue that interests *them* is the one that *everyone* should focus on. *Tracking* makes it visible that several threads of the topic are being discussed. In so doing, it affirms that each thread is equally valid.

HOW

- *Tracking* is a four-step process. First, the facilitator indicates that s/he is going to step back and summarize the discussion so far. Second, s/he names the different conversations that have been in play. Third, s/he checks for accuracy with the group. Fourth, s/he now invites the group to resume discussion.
- Step 1. "It seems that there are three conversations going on right now. I want to make sure I'm tracking them."
- Step 2. "One conversation appears to be about roles and responsibilities. Another has to do with finances. And a third is about what you've learned by working with the last person who held this job."
- Step 3. "Am I getting it right?" Often someone will say, "No, you missed mine!" If so, don't argue or explain; just validate the comment and move on.
- Step 4. "Any more comments?" Now resume the discussion.

ENCOURAGING

WHY

- *Encouraging* is the art of creating an opening for people to participate, without putting any one individual on the spot.
- There are times in a meeting when some folks may appear to be “sitting back” or “letting others do all the work.” Does this mean that they are lazy or irresponsible? Not necessarily. Perhaps they’re just not feeling engaged by the topic at hand. Some people find that a bit of gentle encouragement helps them to relax and / or focus and / or connect with the topic on a meaningful level.
- *Encouraging* is especially helpful during the early part of a discussion. As people warm up to the subject, they are more likely to speak up without further assistance.

HOW

- Here are some examples of the use of *encouraging* during a discussion:
 - “Who else has an idea?”
 - “Is there a student’s perspective on this issue?”
 - “Does anyone have a war story you’re willing to share?”
 - “What do others think?”
 - “Jim just offered us an idea that he called a ‘general principle.’ Can anyone give us an example of this principle in action?”
 - “Are there comments from anyone who hasn’t spoken for a while?”
 - “What was said at table two?”
 - “Is this discussion raising questions for anyone?”
- At times it’s useful to restate the objective of a discussion before posing the question. For example,
 - “We’ve been looking at the root causes of this problem. Who else has a comment?”

BALANCING

WHY

- The direction of a discussion often follows the lead set by the first few people who speak on that topic. Using *balancing*, a facilitator helps a group broaden its discussion to include other perspectives that may not yet have been expressed.
- *Balancing* undercuts the common myth that silence indicates agreement. It provides welcome support to individuals who don't feel safe to express views that they perceive as minority positions.
- In addition to the support it provides to individuals, *balancing* also has a positive effect on the norms of the group. It sends the message, "It is acceptable for people to speak their mind, no matter what opinions they hold."
- When a group appears to be polarized, a *balancing* question can elicit fresh new lines of inquiry.

HOW

- Here are some examples of *balancing* in action:
 - "Are there other ways of looking at this issue?"
 - "Does everyone else agree with this perspective?"
 - "Okay, we have heard where many people stand on this matter. Does anyone else have a different position?"
 - "So, the group has raised various challenges to this proposal. Does anyone want to speak in its favor?"
 - "Can anyone play devil's advocate for a few minutes?"
 - "We've heard opinions from [stakeholder 'group A'] and [stakeholder 'group B']. How about some comments from [stakeholder 'group C']?" For example: "We've heard from the police; we've heard from the store owners. How about some comments from the youth in our neighborhoods?"

HELPING PEOPLE LISTEN TO EACH OTHER

WHY

- The questions on this page support people to interact with each other's ideas. Doing this work is a critical step towards building *mutual understanding*.
- The goal of good listening is to gain a window into the speaker's mind. But many group members feel that they are doing a good job of listening by simply paying attention to what's being said. They don't often take the step of questioning what they hear in order to gain a view of that person's context, assumptions, and values.
- This technique also plays an important role in group development and cohesion, as it helps everyone discover that they can question or challenge each other's ideas without upsetting people.

HOW

- Here are some questions that *Help People Listen to Each Other*.
 - "What did you hear Jim say?"
 - "Does anyone have any questions for Joan?"
 - "Who else is resonating with what Kaneesha just said?"
 - "What part of Armando's idea doesn't work for you?"
 - "Who's got a response to William's comments?"
 - "Sue, how would Naomi's idea play out from where you sit?"
 - "Can you restate Ichiro's remarks in different words?"
 - "Do you feel that Alan understands what you said?"
 - "I wonder if we're getting your point, Ronnie. Can someone summarize?"
- After someone responds to one of these questions, follow by encouraging others to speak too. For example, "Does anyone have a similar view?" or "Did anyone else want to weigh in?"

MAKING SPACE FOR A QUIET PERSON

WHY

- *Making space* sends the quiet person this message: “If you don’t wish to talk now, that’s fine. But if you *would* like to speak, here’s an opportunity.”
- Every group has some members who are highly verbal and others who speak less frequently. When a group has a fast-paced discussion style, quiet members and slower thinkers may have trouble getting a word in edgewise.
- Some people habitually keep out of the limelight because they are afraid of being perceived as rude or competitive. Others might hold back when they’re new to a group and unsure of what’s acceptable and what’s not. Still others keep their thoughts to themselves because they’re convinced their ideas aren’t “as good as” those of others. In all of these cases, people benefit from a facilitator who makes space for them to participate.

HOW

- Keep an eye on the quiet members. Be on the lookout for body language or facial expressions that may indicate their desire to speak.
- Invite them to speak. For example, “Was there a thought you wanted to express?” or “Did you want to add anything?” or “You look as if you might be about to say something . . .”
- If they decline, be gracious and move on. No one likes being put on the spot, and everyone is entitled to choose whether and when to participate.
- If necessary, hold others off. For example, if a quiet member makes a move to speak but someone jumps in ahead, say, “Let’s go one at a time. Terry, why don’t you go first?”
- If participation is *very* uneven, consider suggesting a structured go-around to give each person a chance to speak.

ACKNOWLEDGING FEELINGS

WHY

- People communicate their feelings through their conduct, their language, their tones of voice, their facial expressions, and so on. These communications have a direct impact on anyone who receives them.
- That impact is much easier to manage when feelings are communicated directly rather than indirectly, and intentionally rather than unconsciously.
- Yet the fact remains that human beings are frequently unaware of what they're feeling. In other words, our communications are often driven or shaped by information that we aren't even aware of sending.
- By identifying a feeling and naming it, a facilitator raises everyone's awareness. By then *paraphrasing* and *drawing people out*, the facilitator assists the group to recognize and accept the feelings of its members.

HOW

- *Acknowledging feelings* is a three-step process:
- First, when a group is engaging in a difficult conversation, pay attention to the emotional tone. Look for cues that might indicate the presence of feelings.
- Second, pose a question that names the feelings you see.
- Third, use facilitative listening to support people to respond to the feelings you named.
- Here are some examples of the second step in action. As the examples suggest, be sure to pose any observations as a question.
 - "You sound a bit worried. Is that accurate?"
 - "Looks like you're having a reaction to that. I'm guessing you're frustrated. Am I close?"
 - "From your tone of voice, you seem pleased. Is it true?"
 - "This discussion seems to be bringing up some feelings for you. Are you upset?"
 - "Is this what you're feeling . . . ?"

VALIDATING

WHY

- *Validating* is the skill that legitimizes and accepts a speaker's opinion or feeling, without agreeing that the opinion is "correct."
- Many facilitators wonder whether it is possible to support the expression of a controversial opinion without appearing to take sides. Can we acknowledge someone's feelings without implying we agree with the speaker's rationale for feeling that way?
- The answer is yes. *Validating* means *recognizing* a group's divergent opinions, not taking sides with any one of them.
- Just as you don't have to agree with an opinion to paraphrase it, you do not have to agree that a feeling is justified in order to accept and validate it.
- The basic message of *validating* is, "Yes, clearly that's one way to look at it. Others may see it differently; even so, your point of view is entirely legitimate."

HOW

- *Validating* has three steps. First, paraphrase. Second, assess whether the speaker needs added support. Third, offer the support.
- Step 1. Paraphrase and draw out the person's opinion or feeling.
- Step 2. Ask yourself, "Does this person need extra support? Has he or she just said something that takes a risk?"
- Step 3. Offer that support by acknowledging the legitimacy of what the person just said. For example:
 - "I see what you're saying."
 - "I know just how that feels."
 - "I get why this matters to you."
 - "I can see how you got there."
 - "Now I see where you're coming from."
- Some people, when they feel validated, are prone to open up and say even more. When this happens, be respectful. You're not agreeing; you're supporting someone to speak his / her truth.

EMPATHIZING

WHY

- *Empathizing* is commonly defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.
- This involves putting oneself in another person's shoes and looking out on the world through that person's eyes. The listener then imagines what the person might be feeling, and why – and forms this insight into a statement of acceptance and support.
- *Empathizing* and *validating* both serve to identify and legitimize feelings. *Empathizing* goes one step further: the listener attempts to *identify with and share the actual feeling*. For example, "If it were me I'd be worried!" "That must be really hard." "I'd be feeling very, very sad."
- Moreover, *empathizing* benefits the entire group, providing everyone with a fuller, compassionate understanding of a person's subjective reality.

HOW

- *Empathizing* can be performed using different techniques.
- The most basic technique is to name what you think a person is experiencing. For example, "I imagine this news might be quite upsetting to you."
- Another technique is to mention the factors that led up to the person's experience: "After all the effort you made to keep this project alive, I imagine this news might be quite upsetting."
- A third technique is to speculate on future impacts. "I can see how this news could also play havoc with your other commitments. Has that brought up any feelings yet?"
- A fourth option is to identify concerns about communicating these feelings to others. "I can imagine it might be hard to talk about this topic in this group."
- Always ask for confirmation. If the speaker says, "That's not my experience," encourage him or her to correct your perception.

INTENTIONAL SILENCE

WHY

- *Intentional silence* is highly underrated. It consists of a pause, usually lasting no more than a few seconds, and it is done to give a speaker that brief extra “quiet time” to discover what s/he wants to say.
- Some people need brief silence in order to organize a complex thought and turn it into a coherent statement. Others need a bit of time to consider whether to take the risk to say something that might be controversial. Still others need the silence to digest what has already been said, so they can assess their own reactions and formulate their responses.
- *Intentional silence* can also be used to honor moments of exceptional poignancy. After a statement of passion or vulnerability, intentional silence allows the group to pause, reflect, and make sense of the experience.

HOW

- Ten seconds of silence can seem a lot longer than it really is. The crucial element of this listening skill is the facilitator’s ability to tolerate the awkwardness most people feel during even brief silences. If the facilitator can survive it, everyone else will too.
- With eye contact and body language, stay focused on the speaker.
- Say nothing, not even, “Hmm” or “Uh-huh.” Do not even nod or shake your head. Just stay relaxed and pay attention.
- If necessary, hold up a hand to keep others from breaking the silence.
- Sometimes everyone in the group is confused or agitated or having trouble focusing. At such times, silence may be very helpful. Say, “Let’s take a few moments of silence to think what this means to each of us.”

LINKING

WHY

- *Linking* is a listening skill that invites a speaker to explain the relevance of a statement he or she just made.
- In conversations about complex subjects, it is hard for everyone to stay focused on the same thing at the same time. People often raise issues that seem tangential – in other words, irrelevant – to everyone else.
- When this occurs, it's not uncommon to hear a group member say something like, "Let's get back on track." Or, "Can we take this off-line?" Remarks like those are hard to take. Unless a facilitator intervenes, *the speaker is likely to simply stop talking.*
- Yet ideas that seem unrelated to the main topic can actually be connected with it, often in unexpected ways. *The thought that comes from left field is often the one that triggers the breakthrough.*

HOW

- *Linking* is a four-step process. First, paraphrase the statement. Second, ask the speaker to link the idea with the main topic. Third, paraphrase and validate the speaker's explanation. Fourth, follow with an action from the list below.
- Step 1. *Paraphrase.* (Embarrassed by the group's complaints, some speakers will need the support.)
- Step 2. Ask for the linkage: "How does your idea link up with . . . [our topic]? Can you help us make the connection?"
- Step 3. Validate the explanation: "Are you saying . . . [paraphrase]?" Then say, "I see what you mean."
- Step 4. Follow with one of these:
 - *Draw out* the speaker's idea.
 - Use *balancing* or *encouraging* to pull for other reactions.
 - Return to *stacking*. ("Okay, we have Jim's idea. Whose turn is it to go next?")
 - If the idea is genuinely off-topic, record it on a *parking lot* flipchart.

LISTENING FOR THE LOGIC

WHY

- Solutions to challenging problems often emerge in phases. First, someone has an insight. Then other people see it and shape it into an idea that has good potential to be useful. Then comes the critical thinking that can refine the idea until it is worthy of implementation.
- But often when an idea hits that “good-but-still-rough” stage, some folks become impatient, preferring to delegate the critical thinking to one or two people to do the “detail work” elsewhere.
- In this climate an individual might try to give constructive criticism of the new idea, only to be dismissed by others who don't want to risk derailing the group's enthusiasm.
- *Listening for the logic* supports the person with the critique to express his / her thoughts fully. It also grounds the group. The message is, “If a facilitator can hear this line of reasoning, so can you.”

HOW

- From a standpoint of facilitator's technique, *Listening for the logic* is very similar to *paraphrasing* and *drawing people out*.
- What's different is what you are *listening for*. Rather than listen for signs of someone struggling to make a point, you're *listening for the logic of the speaker's reasoning*, and you are assessing whether the group appears to be digesting it or resisting it.
- A speaker is providing a logical analysis when, for example, s/he:
 - Challenges an assertion.
 - Identifies a bias.
 - Questions a requirement.
 - Seeks to clarify an ambiguity.
 - Makes explicit an assumption.
 - Points out a contradiction.
- When someone offers this type of reasoning and the group responds constructively, stay back and let everyone work.
- However, when you see a speaker's logic being pushed away, *paraphrase* it, *draw the speaker out*, and ask the group for their reactions.

LEGITIMIZING DIFFERENCES

WHY

- When someone feels strongly about a position s/he holds, it is often hard to see the merits of a competing point of view.
- When two or more parties hold different views, it's easy for them – and therefore, an entire group – to become mired in tiresome, repetitive advocacy and argumentation.
- *Legitimizing Differences* is a way for a facilitator to break this logjam. By recognizing that each party is making legitimate points, the facilitator demonstrates that everyone's views are being respected. This creates an opportunity for everyone to step back, take a breath, and acknowledge that their own perspective is not the only one with validity.
- It's surprising how often people are better able to understand one another's competing points of view when those differences are both legitimized by a neutral third party.

HOW

- *Legitimizing Differences* is a three-step process.
- Step 1. Start with a sentence that demonstrates your good faith and neutrality; then tell people what you intend to do:
 “You're both making good points here. I want to now summarize them, so we can treat both views as legitimate.”
- Step 2. Summarize their views:
 “Gina, if I'm getting you right, you're emphasizing the need for [doing XYZ] because not taking that step could lead to serious repercussions. Correct?”
 “Daniel, my impression is that you're pointing out that acting now, without data or a support system in place, will turn out even worse. Yes?”
- Step 3. Explicitly legitimize, and invite others to comment:
 “Your arguments both sound compelling – even though they lead to opposite conclusions! Does anyone have thoughts about this?”

LISTENING FOR COMMON GROUND

WHY

- *Listening for common ground* is a powerful intervention when group members are polarized. It validates the group's areas of disagreement and focuses the group on their areas of agreement.
- Many disputes contain elements of agreement. For example, advocacy groups often have heated internal debates over tactics, even while remaining agreed on key strategic goals. When members of a group take polarized positions, it can be tough for people to remember that they have *anything* in common. Such dichotomies can sometimes be transcended when a facilitator validates *both* the differences in the group *and* the areas of common ground.
- *Listening for common ground* is also a tool for instilling hope. People who believe they are opposed on every front may discover that they share a value, a belief, or a goal.

HOW

- *Listening for common ground* is a four-step process. First, indicate that you are going to summarize the group's differences and similarities. Second, summarize differences. Third, note areas of common ground. Fourth, check for accuracy. Here's an example:
- Step 1. "Let me summarize what I'm hearing from each of you. I'm hearing a lot of differences but also some similarities."
- Step 2. "It sounds as if one group wants to leave work early during the holiday season, and the other group would prefer to take a few days of vacation."
- Step 3. "Even so, you all seem to agree that you want *some* time off before New Year's."
- Step 4. "Have I got it right?"
- Caution: To use this technique effectively, make sure that all parties are included. People whose views have not been at least partially integrated into a shared framework tend to stay focused on their own positions.

LISTENING WITH A POINT OF VIEW

WHY

- On occasion a group's facilitator is also the group's leader (or expert, or staff person) – in other words, a person who is not a neutral third party. This creates a dilemma: How does this person promote his or her own point of view effectively, while still making room for all other opinions to be voiced?
- The resolution – first and foremost – involves *the mind-set* of the person who is playing the dual role.
- On the one hand, s/he has to retain the mind-set of a leader, and *be responsible for clarifying his or her own thinking and communicating it effectively*.
- On the other hand, s/he has to adopt the mind-set of a facilitator, and *care about helping the group do its best thinking*. This requires a focus on supporting others to develop *their* lines of thought.
- *Listening with a point of view* supports this person to keep both roles in balance.

HOW

- *Listening with a point of view* is a five-step process:
- Step 1. As the leader (or expert or staff person), raise the issue about which you have an opinion. State your position.
- Step 2. Ask for reactions.
- Step 3. Respond to participants' comments as a facilitator would, by *paraphrasing* and *drawing people out*. Err on the side of more drawing out rather than less. (Many people find it hard to challenge authority; they may need extra support to risk voicing a differing opinion.)
- Step 4. After *at least two* moves of facilitative listening, give yourself the floor to speak. Now make statements that reflect your own perspective. Answer questions, provide information, explain, advocate, and so forth.
- Step 5. Repeat Steps 2 through 4 as needed, remembering to balance expressing your own point of view with at least twice as much facilitative listening.

SUMMARIZING

WHY

- Good facilitators know the value of encouraging participants to engage in vigorous discussion. But the most interesting conversations can also be the hardest ones to close.
- Making a deliberate effort to summarize a discussion helps participants consolidate their thinking. A restatement of key themes and main points helps people build categories and internalize them. These categories help improve one's understanding of what just transpired, and they also serve as memory aids to improve future recall.
- Ending a discussion abruptly can make a facilitator seem pushy. For example, suppose a facilitator said, "OK, time's up. Let's move to the next topic." This statement, while inoffensive, can be taken as an expression of impatience. Sometimes people respond with knee-jerk resistance. By comparison *summarizing* feels congenial and supportive.

HOW

- *Summarizing* is a 5-step process:
- Step 1. Restate the question that began the discussion: "We've been discussing the success of your program."
- Step 2. Indicate the number of key themes you heard: "I think people raised three themes."
- Step 3. Name the first theme, and mention one or two key points related to that theme: "The first theme was about your strategy. You explored its effectiveness and suggested some improvements."
- Step 4. Repeat this sequence for each theme: "Another theme was the validity of your main goal. You questioned whether it was feasible and realistic. Finally, you examined some personnel issues and you created a new staff role."
- Step 5. Pose a question to bridge to the next topic: "You have done some solid thinking about the effectiveness of the program. Anything else before you move to the next topic on the agenda?"

