Chapter 16

How to facilitate events with stakeholders and members of the public

An experienced professional facilitator is worth their weight in gold. You could run the same event with the same participants, using different facilitators, and get significantly different outcomes. Many researchers think that because they can chair a meeting with other researchers, they can facilitate workshops with stakeholders. This is rarely the case. You will very often be working with very diverse groups with different perceptions of your research, different levels of education and potentially conflicting views. Trying to run a workshop with stakeholders in the same way you would chair a meeting with researchers will rarely get the best out of everyone. In the worst-case scenario, you may end up inflaming conflict and creating long-term difficulties for those you want to work with.

One of the first stakeholder workshops I was charged with designing went very badly when I got the facilitation wrong. It was the first workshop in a funded project that was meant to scope out the potential to conduct a wider research project. The first mistake I made was to ask for the facilitator's day rate when I put the proposal together. When I called her up to engage her for the work, she explained that a one-day workshop involved at least three days of preparation and post-workshop work, so I couldn't afford her. One of my colleagues came to the rescue, recommending an American colleague of his who regularly facilitated stakeholder workshops. For the price of a ticket to a conference, he was happy to facilitate the workshop.

Two things went wrong at the very start. First, our American colleague decided to do a practice run of his conference talk to open the workshop. This might have worked if his talk had something to do with the topic of the workshop, but I could see people shifting uneasily in their seats, wondering if they were at the wrong event. The other thing that was wrong, was that there were three additional people in the room, who I hadn't invited, and I made the mistake of not asking anything about them. Eventually, the workshop started, and people started wheeling out all the old

arguments that they'd had for years. The facilitator then stood and watched, saying nothing, as people started raising their voices and being rude to each other. The break-time came and went, and the argument intensified, with the facilitator looking on with a thoughtful expression on his face. At that point I decided that, despite just being a PhD student with no experience of facilitation, I had to put a stop to this. So, I called time on the arguing and we went to the break. I asked the facilitator why he wasn't facilitating, and he explained that he was American, and everyone was speaking in thick Yorkshire accents, and he couldn't understand a word anyone was saying! So, after the break, we moved to a part of the workshop that involved writing things on Post-it notes and sticking them on the wall. However, there was a problem. The three people I hadn't invited weren't doing the exercise. I went and explained it to them, and still they didn't do anything. By now, everyone else had completed the task, apart from these three, and all eyes were on me as I explained the task one last time and asked if they understood. They said that they understood. So, I asked why they weren't doing it. To my shame, they explained that they were illiterate. I wanted to ground to swallow me up at that moment. I realised that I had humiliated them in front of the very people they wanted to influence in this debate, and I felt horrendous. I announced that we would take an early lunch-break, and asked my facilitator if he had any techniques we could use that didn't involve speaking, reading or writing, to which, of course, the answer was "no". Clearly, this wasn't entirely the fault of the facilitator — I had set him up to fail. But it does illustrate how badly awry things can go when the facilitation goes wrong.

Facilitating dialogue with stakeholders and likely users of research

There are a number of reasons why hiring a professional facilitator (or getting a few facilitation skills of your own) can be particularly useful when engaging with stakeholders and likely users of your research during events, for example:

- Efficiency: more can be discussed in less time
- Impartiality
- Clarity
- A helpful atmosphere
- Appropriate techniques
- More people have a say

- No organisation or individualis in control or has the power of veto
- The outcome is open and more likely to be considered fair by all those involved.

Professional facilitation can be expensive, ranging from around £700 to £3000 for a small event, and up to £8000 for a full-day event with over 100 participants. Prices vary according to the expertise/ reputation of the facilitator and the amount of time necessary to prepare for the event. Unless their role is little more than that of a chairperson to help you steer your way through a simple agenda on time, you are likely to need a number of days of time discussing your aims and coming up with draft facilitation plans that use different techniques to reach these aims. If you want the facilitator to be responsible for writing up the outputs from your event, then this will cost more. It is therefore advisable to build facilitation costs into your research proposal from the outset.

In many projects, there are not sufficient funds to hire a professional facilitator, so we may end up in this role as researchers. When faced with facilitating an event, most of us are understandably nervous.

Some challenges will emerge from the group itself:

- Dominating people with big egos can be hard to manage. You need to learn techniques for keeping these people in check without upsetting them, so that others have a chance to have their say, and feel able to express themselves freely.
- Equally, quiet or unconfident people can be hard to manage. You need to find ways of enabling them to contribute to the group without putting people on the spot or intimidating them.
- Diverse groups are particularly hard to manage. Groups may be diverse in many different ways, including a mix of quiet and dominant individuals, those with greater or lesser formal educational attainment, those with different levels of power and influence, varying levels of interest in the subject (who are more or less informed about it), and people in a group with very different fundamental values and beliefs.

In addition to this, most of us face a number of internal challenges to becoming an effective facilitator. First, we may lack confidence in ourselves. This may be borne of a lack of experience facilitating events with stakeholders, or it may be a deeper-held lack of confidence that we find emerges in all sorts of public situations

where we feel others are judging our performance. Whatever the source of this lack of confidence, there are a number of things that can help reduce your nerves, for example:

- Getting practice: although it may not be possible to practise working with stakeholders, there may be other contexts in which we can try out our facilitation tools and skills, for example, by adapting our teaching with students to incorporate tools and skills we know we'll need to use with stakeholders
- Building in buffer time to your facilitation plan (e.g. sessions you can drop or breaks you can shorten), so you're not creating unrealistic expectations from your event, can help reduce nerves on the day
- Having a facilitation team you can trust to come to your rescue if things seem to be going wrong
- Getting to the venue early so you can sort out any practical issues in good time before participants arrive
- Getting feedback from colleagues on your facilitation plan to make sure it is realistic
- Meeting your facilitation team the day before or in good time before your event to go through the facilitation plan and make sure everyone knows what they are doing
- Considering meeting separately, one-to-one, with any individual you know to be particularly problematic (e.g. argumentative, confrontational), rather than inviting them to the event
- Having a plan B for high-risk activities you have not tried out before can also help reduce your nerves both before and during an event — if a technique isn't working, you know you can change tack. There are also a number of practical tips you can use to keep control of dominating individuals and get the most out of more reticent members of the group (see below).

With practice, there are a number of interpersonal and practical skills that can help you become an effective facilitator. Many of the practical skills are quick and easy to learn, and can make a considerable difference to your practice. However, many of the interpersonal skills are harder to gain. Although some would argue that many of these characteristics are innate and therefore not possible to develop, it may be possible to make efforts to cultivate these characteristics as part of your role as facilitator, though this will take significant time and practice.

It is worth mentioning that interpersonal communication skills are often very culturally specific (though some non-verbal communication transcends cultural differences), so, if you have people from different countries attending, it might be good to know the cultural nuances of those cultures before you go into the room. For example, one of my PhD students, Steven Vella, told me how he once had to jump onto a table and whistle to get the attention of angry stakeholders during a workshop in Malta, threatening to throw everyone out unless they became quiet and asking a member of the project team to apologise for calling them "ignorant locals". This was appropriate in that particular setting, but might have been inappropriate in a UK town hall.

Such interpersonal characteristics of an effective facilitator include, for example, being:

- Perceived as impartial, open to multiple perspectives and approachable
- Capable of building rapport with the group and maintaining positive group dynamics
- Able to handle dominating or offensive individuals
- Able to encourage participants to question assumptions and re-evaluate entrenched positions
- Able to get the most out of reticent individuals
- Humble and open to feed back

Practical facilitation skills include, for example:

- Active listening and understanding. This may includen on- verbal feedback such as eye contact, nodding, smiling, focused attention and valuing silence
- Verbal feedback such as sounds, short phrases, clarifying details, encouraging/probing (asking for more information) and using open (not closed) questions

- Giving people time to clarify their thoughts
- Summarising, to confirm that you are interpreting them correctly
- Letting people know their opinions are valued, but without implying that you agree or disagree with them
- Helping people go beyond facts to meanings
- Helping people to 'own' their problems, take responsibility for them and think of solutions
- Reframing points where necessary to help people move from a negative stance to discuss a positive way forward. This involves acknowledging what has been said, and then saying this in a different way that is less confrontational or negative, followed by an open question that seeks to get at the heart of the problem
- Involving others in the group in solving the problem
- Giving momentum and energy
- Ensuring everyone has an opportunity for input without feeling intimidated
- Making an impartial record of the discussion
- Writing clearly, managing paper (ideally with the help of an assistant so you can focus on group dynamics)

Ultimately, to be able to manage power dynamics in a group, facilitators need to have a deep source of their own power. It takes confidence to deal with powerful individuals who are being disrespectful to others in the group. But I'm not just talking about confidence here. It is that thing that you notice in some people, which you can't really put into words; a quiet presence that demands your attention. We have all been in situations where someone walks into the room and you realise that the atmosphere has changed; the conversation might die down and you notice that everyone is waiting for that one person to speak. It is this quiet power that enables the best facilitators to get the most out of the most challenging groups. I would argue that this sort of 'presence' isn't something you are born with, but is something that can be cultivated with commitment and practice.

In Box 10 you'll find a series of questions I've adapted over the years, which are designed to help you understand how powerful you are as an individual in any given context. The answers you give will differ depending on the context in which you ask the questions, so think specifically of a context in which you would like to have more 'presence', so that you can achieve greater impact, and answer these questions specifically in relation to that context. For example, you might ask how powerful you are in the context of

your research team or a group of stakeholders (such as healthcare professionals or conservationists) that you need to be able to work with intensively to achieve impact. The first types of power (hierarchical and social) are fairly hard to do anything about, though promotion might come along once in a while. When doing research in Africa, I found that my race and gender were barriers to working with stakeholders in certain contexts. Simply being aware of the power or powerlessness you are likely to feel in certain contexts may help you avoid trying to facilitate in those situations. However, you can work on your personal and transpersonal power. It takes time and commitment to change these ways of being into habits and eventually into characteristics, but it is possible. When I was Director of the Aberdeen Centre for Environmental Sustainability, I knew that I wasn't the most powerful person in the organisation. It was a PhD student. Since I had joined the organisation, I noticed that whenever she had an idea, people followed, and things happened. Despite being at the bottom of the hierarchy, what she had that I lacked was bucketloads of personal and transpersonal power. Her life's goal was to make the world a better place and she had enthusiasm and positivity that was infectious and an altruistic vision that inspired hope. Ana ended up working with me as a Post- Doctoral Research Assistant and together we launched the training programme that this book is based on.

Once you've considered the points in Box 10, it can be useful to share your scores with someone you know well. Discuss which categories you score highest in (e.g. mostly 4 and 5 scores). Where you have low power, can you use higher power from a different area to help you in your interactions with others? Where could you increase your power? Would the person you're discussing this with have scored you differently? If so, why?

Box 10: Identify your levels of power

The following points are designed to help you identify the different types of power you possess in any given context. You can use this in a general sense (thinking about the main social group you belong to or interact with most), but it is most useful to think about how powerful you are in a specific context, for example, as a facilitator leading a workshop with people who are interested in your research. Imagine yourself in this situation, and rate how powerful you feel on a scale of 1–5 in relation to each of the following personal characteristics. You may do this in relation to how powerful you feel and/or how powerful you think the other people in this situation think you are (you will need to choose which of these you think most affects your ability to achieve impact).

Hierarchical power:

• Seniority in formal hierarchy
• Expertise
• Access to decision-makers

Social power:

• Race or ethnicity
• Age
• Gender
• Class or wealth
• Education level
• Strength and breadth of your social networks
• Title (e.g. Mrs, Dr or Prof)

Personal power:

• Self-awareness
• Self-confidence and assertiveness (not over-confidence)
• Charisma and strength of character

- Ability to empathise with others
- Life experience and ability to survive adversity
- Ability to communicate and influence others
- Reputation for integrity and honesty
- Creativity
- Honest estimation of your own worth and abilities, being aware of your limitations and weaknesses, whilst focusing on your strengths and abilities
- Being someone who believes in, trusts and builds up others, rather than criticising and gossiping

Transpersonal power:

- Connection to the other; to something larger, more significant and lasting
- Commitment to a positive and clear set of values and beliefs
- Being prepared to challenge the status quo rather than compromise your values
- Ability to overcome or forgive past hurts
- Freedom from fear
- Service to an altruistic vision or cause

Anticipating conflict

Dealing with difficult individuals and situations can be challenging if you've not got a lot of experience as a facilitator. Despite being a professional facilitator myself with experience of facilitating over 50 workshops with stakeholders, I wouldn't consider myself to be particularly experienced. If I've got a workshop that is likely to involve conflict or particularly high stakes, I will always try and pay for a more seasoned facilitator. But sometimes conflict erupts when we least expect it.

If you've already got to the point where people are having angry outbursts and verbally abusing each other, the chances are it's too late to avoid conflict — you're already in it. But if you can spot the early warnings signs, it may be possible to avert conflict. In my experience, most conflicts with stakeholders arise from power imbalances within the group, so simply identifying particularly high- or low-power individuals will alert you to the fact that some form of conflict may be likely.

Here are a few of the signs you can look for to identify people who are (or are perceived by the group or themselves to be) particularly powerful or powerless:

- In some cultures and organisations, the way people dress denotes hierarchical power e.g. managers in universities often wear suits. Check whether those in your group wearing suits are displaying other signs of high power that could be challenging to manage.
- Who does everyone give eye contact to when they speak, and who never gets eye contact? You've probably had that feeling of being invisible when you're in a meeting where everyone else is more powerful than you (the person taking notes in academic meetings gets this feeling on a regular basis). Equally, you probably know how awkward it can feel when people in a group only give eye contact to you, as though there's no one else in the room. If there is someone in the room that the group perceives to be particularly important, you'll notice that at some point during each person's speech (usually at the beginning and the end), they will give that individual eye contact, effectively seeking their approval and hoping to win influence with them.
- Is there someone in the group who regularly speaks over others and cuts others off? Is there someone in the group who rarely gets to the end of what they're saying, and is there someone else who is always heard out? These are other signs of power and powerlessness that you might spot.
- Do you notice that one person's ideas are rarely picked up by the group, perhaps leading to awkward silence or a change of topic? Do you notice that these same ideas may be suggested later on by someone else and be welcomed and discussed actively?
- Who naturally chooses to sit at the head of the table or near the front, and who avoids sitting at the head of the table and chooses to sit at the back?
- Who has a queue of people waiting to speak to them during the break?
- Do some people display particularly confidentor nervous/ deferential body language?
- Does one person dominate the discussion, offering their opinion on every discussion point?
- Are some people confident enough to give many people in the group eye contact and do others avoid giving people eye contact or only give you eye contact as the facilitator?
- Do some people feel so important that they can check their laptop and phone constantly rather than engaging in discussion

with the group?

Any single one of these signs may not mean anything, but if there are a few of these signs pointing to particular individuals, you might start to watch those individuals for signs of conflict, and adapt your facilitation plan to avoid power disparities becoming any more obvious. You have to be careful not to mistake personal traits for signs of power imbalances or conflict (e.g. someone who is naturally shy or prone to colourful outbursts). In some cases, it is possible to resolve this through effective facilitation, for example, politely asking more dominant people to give others space to contribute, or using a device like 'round robin' to give every person in the group a chance to give their opinion (or pass to the next person if they do not feel confident doing this). Usually, the simplest solution if you're not an experienced facilitator is to move into small groups or move away entirely from open group discussion and use a structured elicitation technique, like metaplan, where everyone has the same opportunity to contribute.

Here are a few of the signs to watch out for that might suggest conflict is imminent:

- Are you noticing people closing their body language (e.g. crossing their legs and arms, dropping eye contact etc.)?
- Are people becoming cold, distant, with drawn (e.g.moving back from the table, giving one word answers etc.)?
- People often dress up insults as jokes to make it socially acceptable for them to attack someone else and to make it hard for others to criticise them for their comment ("I was only joking"). Look to see who is smiling at the joke — and more importantly who is not smiling. If the person the joke is aimed at is colouring up, the chances are they took the joke as an insult. You might be too late to do anything about it first time round, but you need to watch the situation like a hawk and politely stamp on any future 'jokes' if you want to maintain a positive group dynamic.
- Are people becoming increasingly argumentative, disagreeing and/or blaming each other?
- Are people moralising or intellectualising each other?

But for the really early warning signs of conflict, you need to look inside yourself and empathise with the group you're working with. If you can really get in touch with the way that the group is feeling, and become sensitive enough to your own feelings, you will start to detect the earliest glimmer of conflict and be able to watch out for

other signs and act promptly. If there's someone in the room who is feeling really uncomfortable, nervous or angry in the group, the chances are they may project those feelings onto you, or that you may detect their feelings through empathy — and you'll start feeling uncomfortable, nervous or angry yourself. Are you experiencing irrational, unaccountable feelings, urges or thoughts, or acting uncharacteristically out of role? It is likely that this is how someone in the group is feeling. The stronger they feel this, and the more people who feel like this, the more likely you are to pick up on it and experience those feelings yourself. In this way, you can pick up on likely conflict well before there are any visible signs, so you can manage the situation and bring back a more positive dynamic into the group before conflict erupts.

Useful techniques for avoiding conflict

Finally, here are some useful tips you can use to avoid conflict and get the most out of facilitating events with stakeholders:

- Set some ground rules: agree them at the outset, and refer back if needed (people are not to talk over one another, everyone's views should be equally respected, no use of offensive language etc.). It may be useful to write these down and place them on the wall for everyone to see. It is typically easy to agree such rules as a group at the outset. They can be particularly useful if someone becomes obstructive or abusive later in the event. If you are unable to keep them in check, you can remind them about the ground rules that the whole group agreed to at the start. Given that they were part of the group that agreed these rules, it is socially quite difficult for them to ignore them, and if they do continue to ignore these rules, you have a clear basis upon which to ask them to leave.
- Any Other Business (or 'parkingspace'): if you have someone who finds it hard to be concise and in particular if contributions are off-topic, it is possible to create a 'parking space' where you can write these ideas up and park them to discuss later. This technique only works if the group has jointly agreed to the aims of the event at the outset, and if you have the flexibility to create a 15–20 minute session at the end to deal with the points that are parked. By parking less relevant ideas for later, you can keep the discussion focused and on time. Experience suggests that by the end of the event, it will have become clear to all participants that the points that were parked were not relevant and hence

the person who suggested them tends to opt to ignore them at this point. Where points are deemed worth covering, you have created time to deal with them, which prevents these points eating into the rest of your time. Also, because it is done at the end of the meeting, participants are usually keen to finish the event and have an incentive to be more concise at that point.

- Open space: if you discover that your aims do not match the aims of some of your participants, this can be difficult to deal with if you want to keep everyone in the room with you and satisfied with the outcomes. A simple technique is to use some of the buffer time you built into your facilitation plan (e.g. a session you can drop or a break you can curtail) to create an 'open space' discussion. Using this approach, the additional topics that participants want to cover are collected (and grouped if there are many points). Participants then have the option to sign up to topics of particular interest to them over the next break (at this point it might become apparent that some of the topics were just the interest of one vocal proponent, as others don't sign up for that group), and then you facilitate small group discussions, recording points and feeding them back to the wider group. If you don't have enough facilitators to do this, you may ask the person who proposed each topic to facilitate their group.
- Empathise with and mirror your group: get a sense of how the group is feeling (e.g. bored, tired or angry) and adapt your approach to their needs. Empathy is about putting yourself in other people's shoes, so you need to connect with their feeling, identifying with it in some way, such as by voicing it or mimicking it via body language (or both). Then you can start to counter feelings that are likely to negatively affect group dynamics, gradually changing your body language, tone of voice and language to become increasingly open, up-beat and interested. Although this can take significant effort, you will be surprised at how many start to mirror you and begin feeling and acting in more positive ways.