



How Assertive Can a Facilitator Be?

A meeting without a facilitator is about as effective as a team trying to have a game without a referee.

Consider this scenario. You're facilitating a meeting in which a key decision has to be made; however, two of the members get embroiled in a conflict. They take turns interrupting one another. Neither one is listening or acknowledging the other. Tempers rise. The rest of the group is increasingly uncomfortable and frustrated. As the conflict escalates, you stand by saying nothing in the mistaken belief that facilitators must stay neutral and that means staying totally removed. This is a common misconception.

When a discussion encounters difficulty it is the facilitator's job to make an intervention. Experienced facilitators know that making interventions is totally within the boundaries of the facilitator's role, does not violate their neutrality, and must be made whenever group effectiveness is threatened. Advanced facilitators are also aware that intervention responses fall into two categories, and they know when to use each type.

Process = How

- methods and procedures
- how relations are maintained
- tools being used
- group dynamics
- rules or norms

Content = What

- subject for discussion
- the task
- the problem being solved and the solution
- the decision being made

While it is true that facilitators should generally be non-directive on the content being discussed, they must be assertive on the process aspects of any meeting. During discussions, a good facilitator is always assertive about managing member interactions. This involves asking people to rephrase negative comments, making sure all voices are being heard, enforcing existing group norms, and asking participants to intentionally use the skills of SPACE.

Some assertive actions facilitators take, when the situation warrants it, include:

- naming violations of group norms
- calling on quiet people
- asking individuals to journal before they speak
- slowing down the interactions with intentional paraphrasing
- calling time-outs and breaks
- asking probing questions
- summarizing points of view
- ensuring that action plans are in place
- using debrief activities

A facilitator's main job is to manage the process and leave the content to participants. However, facilitators are often working in areas where they're experts. When this is the case

and when the group is in need of additional information or expert advice, a content intervention may indeed be appropriate.

Stepping out of the neutral role to participate in the content is tricky since it may shift power away from group members toward the facilitator so that he or she ends up controlling the outcome. To guard against this possibility, content interventions need to be made cautiously and intentionally. Here are some guidelines that may be helpful:

- Identify your specific expertise early in the planning stages and agree on when and how that expertise will be shared.
- Describe personal areas of expertise to participants at the start of any meeting where you might provide content interventions.
- Design the agenda so that expertise-sharing items are clearly segregated from group discussions.
- If there is an unexpected need for your expertise in the middle of a discussion, clearly state that you're stepping out of the facilitator role, temporarily, to offer expert advice.
- Always be clear whether; you're sharing expert opinion or non-negotiable input.
 - Expert opinion is sharing a preference based on your expertise;
 - Nonnegotiable input is something that is legislated or is a design feature that the group does not have authority to change

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decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

adapted from [Facilitating with Ease](#) and [Advanced Facilitation Strategies](#) by Ingrid Bens

