

Facilitation Essentials: Power and Privilege in Facilitation



This quick reference tool is intended for employees at all levels who are leading or facilitating meetings. Building trust is essential for supporting full participation in a meeting. Understanding the role that power and privilege can play helps facilitators consider what they need to do to establish and maintain trust. This resource provides a brief introduction to the topic and offers practical guidance and tools for dealing with the undercurrent of power and privilege in a meeting.

Why address power imbalances?

A facilitator's job is to build trust to support full participation in a meeting. Using communication skills, facilitators can find ways to build bridges between people.

The difference between someone's intent and the impact their words may have on another person is at play in every conversation. In a power dynamic, this issue is magnified.

Definitions

- **Power:** The combination of an individual's or a social group's agency and access (actual or perceived) to influence an outcome, decision or relationship. Power creates asymmetry in relationships between people and groups and can be used both positively and negatively.
- **Privilege:** A social relationship where one social group benefits at the expense of another. It is an advantage that is often invisible to those who have it.

Formal power versus informal power

- Formal power is attributed by virtue of an individual's title or position in an organization.
- Informal power occurs where an individual has influence over others, perhaps due to their experience, personality, relationships or privilege, including implicit privilege (gender, race, age, etc.).

Power "over" versus power "with"

- Power "over" is based on the belief that power can be held by one individual to control others.
- Power "with" focuses on sharing power, making space for the diversity of individuals, and growing power together to achieve positive outcomes.

What can facilitators do?

When facilitating a meeting, keep in mind three guiding principles: be impartial, clarify roles, and set the rules for decision making.

1. **Be impartial:** Impartiality towards the subject matter and the people in the room is critical for facilitators.

Here's how:

- Support everyone's right to be heard.
- Don't comment on people's ideas.
- Help the group to stay on topic.

Consider what you would do in the following contexts:

- A current or former superior is present in the room (for example, your supervisor is present).
- Gender representation at the meeting is unequal (for example, 12 men and 2 women).
- There is unequal representation of racialized groups or visible minorities (for example, 8 white people and 3 visible minorities).
- Last-minute accessibility accommodations are needed for some participants in your session (for example, use of a screen reader).



2. Clarify roles: Knowing who is present at a meeting, and in which capacity, helps facilitators plan for the meeting and contextualize the discussions.

- Review your agenda and the rationale for your approach.
- Share the agenda with participants in advance.
- Assess whether everyone will be in agreement and anticipate areas of divergence.
- Seek advice on how you can ensure that everyone is positioned to participate fully and inclusively in the meeting.

Consider the following questions

- What kinds of relationships exist between participants?
- Who is not in the room?
- What kinds of roles (formal and informal) do various participants play?
- What information can be shared and with whom?
- Who has more at stake in the outcomes?
- Who has more lived experience regarding the topic?
- How do the relationships factor into the ability of participants to navigate the session safely?

3. Set the rules for decision making: Establishing the ground rules for decisions and sharing the rules with participants in advance helps people focus their contributions during a meeting.

Here's how:

- Plan the agenda to include "likely wins" early in the meeting.
- Include regular pulse checks to determine participants' readiness to make a decision.
- Build on this by asking a few people with different views to share their perspective.

Consider the following questions:

- Is consensus required or will the group vote?
- Is the group in a position to make a decision?
- Will the group be offering recommendations to someone else who will decide?

Approaches to support full participation

Your goal should be to ensure that everyone participates in the meeting, while recognizing that some individuals are attending in a specific capacity (subject-matter experts, executives, etc.).

Here's how:

- Plan activities keeping in mind the size of the group and the objective of the meeting.
- Ensure you have all the information you need about participants.
- Anticipate all possible barriers, including the use of acronyms or technical terms.
- Identify and deal with resistance.
- Use an effective icebreaker that is targeted to the group.
- Set ground rules for achieving an open environment.
- Think through back-up options to support dialogue.
- Break into small groups for parts of the discussion.
- Have people write down their ideas, then share them aloud or group them using sticky notes or collaborative software.
- Invite senior officials to open or close the meeting or summarize what they have heard and are taking away.
- Invite a senior official to express a position, then ask questions to elicit other perspectives.
- Establish in advance how decisions will be made and share the approach with all participants before the meeting.
- Consider seeking consensus as the decision-making approach when all participants need to have an equal voice.

