

How to encourage constructive discussion

In the previous sections, you have learned how to prepare for a meeting, how to set ground rules, and how to resolve conflicts using “low-to-high intervention” methods. But how can you create an environment for active discussions and the full engagement of participants? Successfully facilitating a meeting means not only solving conflicts and setting fundamental rules, but also means inspiring your staff or volunteers to think creatively. Here are some suggestions and methods to promote constructive discussions.

Create a Harmonious Atmosphere

To create a good atmosphere, the first step is to break the ice. The basis for constructive discussions is that participants are at ease. If people do not know each other very well, it is very difficult for participants to feel comfortable and to have constructive discussions.

Here are two popular ice-breakers for meetings:

- 1. *Pair Introduction*** : Before the meeting, pair participants up and ask people to interview their partners, getting to know their background, hobbies, etc. Then ask the participants to introduce their partner in front of everyone.

2. Finish the Sentence: Distribute some incomplete sentences to participants and ask them to fill in the blanks. Choose some easy and not so serious topics, for example:

- If I were prepared to risk everything, I would...
- If I could live anywhere in the world, I would move to...
- The best gift I have ever received is...
- The best gift I have ever given to someone is...
- I am an expert at...

Methods for Promoting Constructive Discussions

1. Participants are less inclined to discuss because they worry about giving the wrong answer. So, avoid questions with only one answer (*e.g.*, “yes or no” questions) as they may kill the discussion.
2. Participants are less likely to speak after the facilitator has shared his or her ideas. Before expressing yourself, ask for input from everyone. Throw questions back to the participants.
3. Compared with speaking in front of the group, some participants prefer less-pressured group discussions. Before the meeting, try to pair people up or break them down into smaller groups to discuss and then invite a speaker from each group to summarize.
4. Some participants prefer to organize their thoughts before speaking. Before or during meetings, distribute some simple writing or thinking tasks, leaving some time for them to prepare before inviting people to share.

Discussion Prompts

Creative and effective discussions rely on helpful “prompts”. What are prompts? They are questions, topics, images or incidents that you want participants to consider and respond to. Prompts work to provide specific

discussion points for the participants. The following are some methods to prompt discussions:

1. ***Respond to Headlines***: provide (or ask the participants to provide) a work-related news headline, and ask people to read and discuss the relationship between the news and their work. You can also use images, music, sound bites, or video clips.
2. ***Share Strengths*** : Everyone in an organization is an expert in some way. Invite staff or volunteers to present on their specific fields and experience. This will not only build public speaking skills, but also demonstrate their value to others in the group. In Asia Catalyst, we usually hold lunches to have staff and volunteers share their strengths. If a member of your organization has participated in external trainings or conferences, you can also invite them to give a presentation on what they have learned.
3. ***Situational Hypotheticals (What would I do if...)***: Participants can discuss situational hypotheticals, which can provide training for scenarios that might actually arise for the organization in the future. Participants can brainstorm about the impacts of the hypothetical situations and how the organization should best cope with these effects. Set forth below are some hypotheticals relating to Chinese HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment work:
 - a. What if the Global Fund leaves China?
 - b. What if our landlord terminates our lease and asks our organization to move?
 - c. What if your contact in the local CDC is fired?
 - d. What if there is a global economic recession and international donors cannot continue supporting the organization?

4. *Scenario Response* : Scenarios do not have to be purely hypothetical. You can ask the participants to brainstorm on an actual work-related situation or a typical scenario that has arisen in the past. Scenario settings may also be situations through which your peer organizations have worked. The scenarios below come from complicated situations in which Chinese NGOs have been involved:

- a. *Scenario 1* : A large company offers you a substantial grant, which can double your annual budget and increase your access to your programs. However, this company has been under media scrutiny recently for unethical business practices. Further, one of the board members of the company is asking for a board seat on your organization in return for their donation. Would you accept the donation?

- b. *Scenario 2* : A peer organization suggests a cooperative program between their organization and yours. They have a large research grant and hope that you can help them conduct community research. You have never worked with the executive director of this organization, but you have heard from others that she is a difficult person. Would you agree to cooperate?

- c. *Scenario 3*: Your organization is quite small and unknown, but over the past few years your reputation has grown among your peers. CNN, a famous U.S. news network, has heard about your work and has offered to make a television special about your organization. This opportunity is beneficial for your advocacy and fundraising work. However, it may pose some risks as well. What are the costs and benefits of such a program? What are the risks? Would you accept the invitation?

5. **Role-play exercise:** Role-play is similar to the scenario response exercise, the main difference being that in role-play, you assign a specific role to a person and ask him or her to act out the scenario. This exercise can encourage participants to adopt a brand new perspective to understand others' viewpoints. Role-play is also helpful for you to consider some important stakeholders (for example, police, government partners, and the media) and their responses to your work. Here is an example of a role-play exercise:

- a. **Role-play Scene:** You work for an NGO called Friend of Greenlands, whose mission is to help victims of environmental pollution. Two years ago, a factory moved into the Greenlands Village, where you live, and the villagers started to complain that the water was so polluted that it could no longer be used for irrigation. Children in the village began to get sick and were forced to miss school. In order to call attention to these issues, your organization plans to hold a photography exhibition, featuring photos documenting the pollution problem. How will each group or stakeholder in the community react to this exhibition? (Ask each participant to choose one character from the box to analyze.)

Health Bureau	The Manager of the Factory
Parents	Workers at the Factory
Village Officials	Major Donors to your Organization
Industrial and Commercial Bureau	The Department of Education
Media	Farmers

We do not use these scenario discussions, role-plays, writing assignments, and other tools arbitrarily or for their own sake. These exercises provide opportunities for valuable input and discussion. In addition, they give organizations a chance to evaluate which staff members or volunteers contribute the most to meetings, who needs more encouragement, who comes prepared, and who should be paying more attention to their responsibilities. These are valuable tools both for promoting creative and meaningful discussions and for evaluating the strengths and weakness of your staff and volunteers.