

# FaciliTips: Quick Tips for Online Facilitation

*Have additions and suggestions? Email them to [nancyw@fullcirc.com](mailto:nancyw@fullcirc.com) and if we add your suggestion to the list, we will add you as a contributor.*

*Note: these are not unique to online, but have been found IMPORTANT in online facilitation!*

## General Tips

- Assume good intent. Remind others of this simple trick.
- Role model the behavior you wish others to use.
- Practice and encourage active listening/reading.
- Be as explicit as possible in your communication.
- Don't automatically assume understanding -- ask for clarification as needed.
- Build trust by doing what you say you will do. Encourage others to do the same.
- Trust is slow to be granted, easily taken away. Encourage an environment that values trust.
- Use irony and humor with care as it does not always come across online as you might have intended. You can always use emoticons to clarify! ;-)
- Think before you hit the button and a message goes out.
- Approach every contribution with curiosity, expecting surprise and wonder...

## Process Facilitation Tips

- Make rules, expectations or norms consistent, explicit and clear.
- Provide orientation materials and paths for all new members.
- Remember not everyone thinks or perceives the way you do. Seek to understand participants' styles and needs.
- Provide ongoing (and often repeated) guidance on "what goes where" in any interaction space.
- Use recognizable names or pseudonyms (for chat and such).
- Encourage the use of personal profiles to build relationships.
- Consider cultural differences of participants.
- Help members take ownership of the interaction space.
- Use small group activities to build relationships and "get acquainted."
- Respond to all first-time participants. Welcome people by name.
- Acknowledge and reciprocate participation.
- Reply to messages that get no other recognition. Even if it is a "treading water reply."
- Use questions to encourage participation.
- Stimulate input with positive private emails to individuals.
- Notice if someone is "missing" for long periods of time. Email them and invite them back.
- Let others know when you will be offline for extended periods of time.

- Nurture others to help host and facilitate the group.
- Encourage people to mentor and assist each other. Recognize mentors.
- Draw out the quiet members.
- Help focus the chatters.
- Don't fan the flames (or the flammers!) (*see difficult situations below*).
- Ask members for feedback. What is working for them? What is not? What is missing?
- Respect copyright and confidentiality. Do not repost other's postings or emails without explicit permission.

### **Facilitation Tips for Task-Oriented Groups**

- Make purpose and task VERY clear/visible/explicit.
- Post timelines and reminders.
- Agree on process issues up front. Address as needed on an on-going basis.
- Make roles and responsibilities clear and visible.
- Use email as appropriate for notification.
- Summarize and/or index conversations of value to make them accessible to the group.
- Monitor member activity with available tools to gauge participation and alter your facilitation strategy accordingly.
- When activity levels drop, evaluate to ensure you have compelling reasons for participation: real work, learning, shared tasks, personal or professional development.
- Let divergent processes flow free. Channel convergent processes.

### **Tips for Dealing with Difficult Situations**

- Don't be intimidated by challenges. They are learning opportunities for everyone when handled with grace.
- Help bring learning out of friction or "creative abrasion."
- Help people understand how they come across if others are having difficulty with them. Consider doing this offline or privately.
- Avoid "one-upmanship" and point-by-point defenses which usually only escalate problems.
- Use back channel email to resolve problems unless the issue involves a larger group.
- Use your administration tools (i.e., deleting posts) lightly and carefully.
- Don't assume a lack of response means dissent or assent. Seek explicit responses.

### **Structural & Content Tips**

- Provide great links, resources and relevant, stimulating content to foster interaction.
- Label topic and conference items clearly
- Frame topic openers clearly and demonstrate the goal or purpose of the topic or thread.

- Take into account participation from different time zones.
- Explore the use of color and images as communication and facilitation tools.
- Keep "conversations" in their most logical place -- social chat in social spaces, content or action specific interaction in their own spaces or topics.
- Look for participation patterns and changes in conversations.
- Open new topics to support new threads as needed.
- Observe the rhythm of topics and close old topics as they grow dormant.
- Consider time-delimited events or topics to foster activity.
- Keep the online space free from "garbage" such as duplicate posts, or disallowed content (i.e. pornography, advertising or whatever your group norms dictate.)
- Don't pile too much into one post. Break it up into small paragraphs or multiple posts, especially if you are dealing with more than one point or topic.
- Don't obsess about typos. Life is too short.

### **One for the Road...**

- Facilitation is the combination of knowledge and practice. So practice, practice, practice.
- Read between the lines.
- Seek to be fair.
- Have fun.
- Use common sense.
- When all else fails, ask and listen. Again. Again.

### **Sources:**

- Notes from Uri Merry, Mihaela Moussou, Margaret McIntyre, Denham Grey, TJ Elliott and others from the Knowledge Ecology Work Group at <http://www.co-i-l.com/>
- Online Facilitation Classes from [Wise Circle Training](#)
- <http://www.fullcirc.com/> (Full Circle Associates)
- <http://www.rheingold.com/> (Howard Rheingold)
- <http://www.awaken.com/>
- <http://www.wwcoco.com/> (Sue Boettcher)
- Heather Duggan
- The members of the [GroupFacilitation](#), [OnlineFacilitation](#), and [ComPrac](#) listservs