Facilitating Fellowship Discussion Sessions

Roundtable discussions have become our standard way of sharing ideas throughout the fellowship. These sessions can be used to discuss a wide variety of material, including issue discussion topics, literature review and input, service training workshops, *Conference Agenda Report* discussions, and so on. Coming together in this way encourages greater participation and interaction among those who attend, inspiring members to engage in the topics and share enthusiasm and ideas.

Included here are some of the basic tools and approaches necessary for having successful discussion sessions. With effective facilitation based on the strategies outlined here, our basic session outlines can be turned into vibrant, lively events with far-reaching results. A crucial element of successful sessions is adequate preparation. Familiarity with these approaches and the outlines for each session, as well as some knowledge about the audience, will go a long way in helping to make the necessary preparations.

Materials Needed for Sessions

In general, most sessions will require the following materials. Make note of any additional items needed in the session outline as part of the preparation.

- Pens and note sheets with session questions
- Large Post-It easel pad, chalkboard or white board in front of room
- Large Post-It easel sheets and markers for tables, if available
- Ground Rules, Brainstorming Guidelines, Facilitator's Instructions, and A Vision for NA Service

Introducing the Session

First Session/Event of the Day Introduce yourself and other session facilitators, review the length of the session, and make any necessary announcements (schedule for the day, bathrooms, parking, smoking, etc). Depending on the size and makeup of the group, consider having each member introduce him/herself by name and current service position. This can provide a snapshot of the level of experience in the room. This may not be necessary if those present already know each other.

Explain the desired atmosphere and outcomes for the session. Stress the need to share ideas and experience, to stay focused, and to listen and learn with an open mind and heart. Ask for help to preserve a mutually respectful tone, much as we would find in a meeting.

Introducing the Topic Discuss the purpose and focus of the session, touching on bullet points from the session outline. A brief overview of the importance of the topic and the information to be discussed will help members get a frame of reference. Sharing a brief related story or personal experience may be a way to highlight the impact of the issue being discussed.

Icebreaker Activities

Icebreakers are meant to help orient members to the small group process and build community for the larger group.

Some ideas to get things started:

- Have each table create a name for their small group.
- Have members share interesting personal details, and have the group choose some of those details to share with the large group.
- Discuss a question or share personal experiences related to the topic.

Large Group Discussion

Introduction Spend a few minutes introducing the material to be discussed using points from session outlines as a framework. After the lead-in, ask large-group discussion questions one at a time, allowing members to take turn sharing answers with the whole group. The amount of time spent on each question will depend on the material (and the energy about the issue) and on the length of the session, schedule for the day, etc.

The Questions Some questions may be used as primers, just to get members thinking about and sharing ideas. It isn't necessary to capture answers to these questions on note sheets. When the group begins to discuss the session's main questions, one of the facilitators will want to write the responses on the pad at the front of the room for everyone to see. Asking follow-up questions can help distill the ideas offered to the clearest and strongest points possible. NA clichés are common answers; encourage members to give specific examples.

Small Group Discussion

Introduction Spend a few minutes introducing the material to be discussed using points from session outlines as a framework. Once the material has been presented, explain the small group discussion process: review the brainstorming guidelines, ground rules, and facilitator's instructions. Have each group select a facilitator and recorder; remind everyone to share the time equally. Recorders at each table should write answers on post-it sheets in large, clear print, including the session name and question number(s) on each sheet.

The Questions Depending on the session outline, how the questions will be divided up among the groups will vary. A common approach is to divide the room into two or three sections, assigning each section different questions to discuss. If groups are given more than one question to answer, be sure to tell them how much time to spend on each. Remind everyone when it's time to move on to the next question. If background or reference materials on the topic have been provided, remind members to refer to them in their discussions. If time allows, it may help to have groups spend a few minutes prioritizing their answers.

Reporting Back When time is up, ask groups to put their completed post-it sheets on the walls. Working one question at a time, allow members from each group to share their answers. Depending on the time available and the topic discussed, groups may be allowed to give a single answer, their top three answers, or even all of their answers. The session outline may provide guidance on this. If necessary, ask follow-up questions to help develop or explore ideas.

Session Wrap-up

Spend a few minutes reviewing the main points of the session, linking back to the opening statements of the session. Give examples of how the ideas shared or work accomplished in the session can help us to better meet our goals as a fellowship. Remind participants to try to take away as many new ideas as possible from the session and share them with others. That is how we help Narcotics Anonymous and our service system continue to grow and thrive.

Remember to share your experiences and input on topics with NA World Services.
New ideas often lead to solutions for old problems.
Email your feedback to worldboard@na.org.