

## THE ART OF GOOD FACILITATION



Good facilitation is key to effective community land protection efforts: because the process asks the community to grow and stretch, to address complex local power dynamics, and to redefine some of the core constructs of how they govern their lands and resources, there must be a strong sense of trust and cooperation between facilitators and the community. While some elements of what makes someone a good facilitator are core personality traits that must be hired for, good facilitation can be cultivated through practice, experience, curiosity, self-reflection, a commitment to personal growth, and by learning “the hard way” through mistakes and failures. Broadly, good facilitators:

1. **Are personally committed to and profoundly passionate about the work**, driven by a sense of vocation or commitment to social justice and human dignity that goes far beyond their job description or paycheck.
2. **Have a “learner’s mindset” and are genuinely curious** about community dynamics, approach everything as an inquiry, and are open to what wants to arise and what needs to happen in a community’s process, rather than enforcing their own external agenda.
3. **Are self-aware and reflective**, constantly reviewing and debriefing both their own performance as well as what happens in community meetings. Good facilitators are **driven to learn and grow**, appreciative of mastery, motivated to improve their own performance, take initiative to learn new skills, and are committed to their own personal and professional development.
4. **Have a profound humility** that enables them to meet the community “where its at” - including its core norms, values and customs - and keeps them open to being personally transformed in the process.
5. **Slowly and surely build trust** by creating relationships with community members over time through the authentic expression of empathy, affection, and interpersonal connection.
6. **Are highly perceptive** of even the subtlest shifts in tone, dynamics and mood during community meetings; pay close attention to non-verbal signals and “energies” that emerge; and are thus **able to arrive at a deep understanding of community power dynamics**.
7. **Recognize that community members are experts, and have the willingness and confidence to listen more than speak**; to ask questions of the audience (rather than lecture or present information) and then build new concepts and ideas on foundation of the community’s existing knowledge.
8. **Honor the people they are working with by “being of them” or “with them” at a deeper level**: speaking their language, dressing as they dress, using local examples to make points, and, most of all, showing them authentic respect and esteem.
9. **Have a certain magnetism, enthusiasm or energy when they are facilitating a meeting** that keeps people’s attention and focus and inspires them to action and reflection.

10. **Have a strong grasp of the content they are presenting** - as well as the “why” behind every component of the work - and the ability to present an issue in a way that people can immediately grasp it and see its connection to their daily lives.
11. **Are organized but nimble**, preparing detailed session plans but able to be flexible and dynamic when community meetings go in a different direction.
12. **Embrace conflict as an eventuality, and are agile and strong in moments of conflict.** Good facilitators know that conflicts are the fruit of difficult dynamics within a community - and use the conflict to address those dynamics. They do not see conflict as something to “fix” but rather as something generative to engage with as an indicator of deeper trends within the community.
13. **Are comfortable with silence, and use silence as a tool**, allowing silences to be transformational, or to use the silence after a hard question or a big statement to turn questions back to participants, asking them to think.
14. **Are competent and confident**, holding their own power and authority lightly, yet speaking only about what they are knowledgeable about and comporting themselves graciously.
15. **Have a strong sense of self-acceptance** – in preparing for, facilitating and debriefing meetings – that allows them to be vulnerable, to take risks, and to face challenges head on. Good facilitators have the self-confidence to not always be in control and to surrender to what emerges as needing to happen, even though they may not know exactly what to say or do in response.
16. **Are highly empathic and able to genuinely listen to what is being said**, to consider the speaker’s experience and feelings, and to respond in a genuine, related way.
17. **Are committed to being accountable to community members**, and show this by establishing clear roles and responsibilities for facilitator and community alike, then carrying out their commitments and responsibilities impeccably.
18. **Are honest, truthful, and transparent**, fearlessly and tactfully “telling it like it is” and presenting the complete and nuanced truth of a situation.
19. **Are able to be open, vulnerable and authentic**; including being comfortable telling stories about their own lives and the challenges they have personally faced. Good facilitators are comfortable not knowing or being wrong: they are willing to say, “I don’t know, how can we find

out?” and to admit publicly that they made a mistake or could have done something better.

20. **Are open to being personally challenged and transformed**; good facilitators create space for others to be transformed by being willing to be transformed themselves.

## WHAT IS GOOD FACILITATION?

How do the traits and qualities of a good facilitator translate into good meeting facilitation? Broadly, good facilitation:

1. **Invests time in understanding a community’s needs, interests and goals, then adapts the program to the actual needs of community, not the perceived needs.** Good facilitation is built on a deep and nuanced understanding of people’s goals; it supports each community to create its own roadmap, based on its own motivations and norms, towards its own self-created goals.
2. **Does not shortcut the process to get to the end goal, but rather ensures that the process itself is where the deep change occurs, including learning, problem-solving, and legal empowerment.** Good facilitation begins from a foundation of an authentic consensus (among facilitators and community members) of the goals and outcomes of the work being undertaken. Even throughout a complex, lengthy process, facilitators keep the agreed end goals in mind and routinely remind community members how each aspect of the work is a step towards reaching those goals.
3. **Is a total shift in power dynamics from a teacher-centered approach to a learner-centered approach, in which power is shared between facilitators and community members, with both bringing their expertise to the exchange.** Good facilitators structure meetings as a discussion, where the outcome of what will be decided or determined is not known in advance, but rather evolves through collaborative dialogue, reflection, and thoughtful analysis.
4. **Moves a community forward by asking a series of thought-provoking questions (rather than lecturing), then using community members ideas (and facilitators’ real-time analysis of what their responses indicate) to shape how the meeting moves forward.** Good facilitation starts from the point of knowledge of the learners and exhausts the collective groups’ knowledge before building on it with additional information. Often, this information is not simply “delivered” – but rather

arrived at by means of thoughtful questions that lead the groups' thinking further. Good facilitation meets people "where they are at," and takes into consideration what they are ready for and want to know/understand; understanding this takes acute observation and flexibility.

5. **Helps communities to see the bigger picture of their challenges, understand the interplay of complex forces that shape their reality, and respond appropriately.** Every person's lived experience is impacted by global trends, yet often local actions appear to happen in isolation. Good facilitators help position community challenges within regional or national patterns. When people gain a deeper understanding of the complex systems and dynamics impacting them, they can then create a more nuanced, effective action plan. Similarly, good facilitation links the efforts being undertaken as a community to the intricacies and minutiae of peoples' every day lives.
6. **Supports each community to critically analyze its problems, brainstorm and determine its own solutions to the challenges faced, then design and carry out its own plan of action.** Good facilitation empowers and guides community members to "figure out it for themselves" (rather than imposing an externally-created plan) then supports and fosters community members' various skill sets, letting strong community members lead according to their strengths.
7. **Conforms to the community's schedule and plans,** rather than demanding that community members attend meetings on the facilitators' schedule, and locates meetings in neutral locations to avoid becoming a pawn in local power struggles.
8. **Understands that it is not possible to rush a process for a specific goal or outcome and so consciously works at the community's pace,** rather than pushing the community according to an externally-imposed timetable.
9. **Involves careful planning for meetings, with a clear goal, agenda and structure.** Good facilitation is carefully planned to take the community on a clear journey from start to finish, where issues are raised, deliberative discussion occurs, decisions are taken/an action plan is made, and/or a pre-determined meeting "goal" is achieved. This involves thinking in advance about who will attend the meeting (or should attend the meeting) and how to ensure that all stakeholders' voices are heard.
 

Facilitators might prepare key questions in advance, make session guides, anticipate community reactions and be ready to address them, and ensure that pre-meeting mobilization occurs to ensure strong attendance and community awareness about the meetings agenda and goals.
10. **Uses tools, visuals, role-plays, skits, and participatory activities ingeniously to awaken community awareness, help them to understand and analyze the bigger picture.** Good facilitation understands that some people learn best by seeing, while others learn through hearing, reading, or personal experience – and so creates activities and exercises to ensure that all kinds of learners are reached, using locally-available materials and culturally-appropriate stories and metaphors.
11. **Builds difficult conversations on a foundation of fun, storytelling, and entertainment.** While legal empowerment work often addresses matters of grave injustice, the most effective facilitation ensures that the process towards justice is fun, joyful, and characterized by laughter and celebration. This can increase community participation; people may both attend meetings in higher numbers as well as share their ideas and opinions more; people often feel free to express themselves when meetings are filled with laughter and joy.
12. **Fearlessly addresses conflict in a socially and culturally appropriate manner.** Good facilitation *names* what is happening (asking thoughtful questions, noticing, pointing out dynamics and forces at play), *unmasks* the dynamic (probe the details), and then *engages* with it (not fixing it, but simply creating the space for the community to interact with and address the matter). In this way, analysis of the specific conflict at issue can help the community to create systems that address and resolve similar, future challenges before they become conflicts.
13. **Ensures that meetings are participatory** by paying attention to who is not speaking and supports them to speak, respectfully containing the voices of those who are dominating, and creating a **safe space for all stakeholders**, including women, youth, minorities, and members of all vulnerable groups to speak their minds and share their ideas. This skill extends to **supporting community members to take all ideas seriously**, regardless of the speaker's identity or relative "power" in the community.

14. **Uses body language, speech and movement to put people at ease, level power imbalances between the facilitator and the community, make people feel welcome and included, and inspire participation.** Such tactics include:

- Speaking audibly, so everyone can hear;
- Making clear, open eye contact;
- Listening more than speaking;
- Maintaining a tone that keeps dialogue open and curious;
- Facilitating without notes or papers;
- Staying fully “present” energetically, as being “absent” for even a moment is obvious to meeting participants.
- Moving around the space, standing near different participants, drawing them in and calling them by name.
- Sitting whenever possible, to be on the same level as participants, rather than at the front of the space like a teacher, or arranging the space in a circle formation.

15. **Presents new information to community members by starting from a basis of what the community already knows and building from there,** exhausting the collective group’s knowledge and expertise before presenting any additional information, linking new concepts to community members’ lived experiences, and supporting them to use the new information in a way that will benefit them.

16. **Supports the community to create structures and clear roles that allow the group to move forward in a coordinated, organized manner.** Good facilitation both creates and arises from excellent management; it supports the establishment of well-functioning committees or working groups, clear decision-making protocols, and other systems that allow each community to achieve its desired ends in a participatory, equitable manner.