



Guidance for Facilitators of Peer Discussion Groups

The role of the facilitator

A facilitator's role is to assist a group to achieve its objectives by ensuring that it has the resources it needs and by encouraging and supporting the group members. The group has responsibility for the content of the discussion and, in addition, the facilitator attends to the process. Another option is for the role of facilitator to rotate around the group. Facilitation is a skill, however, and the success of the group will rest with a good facilitator. Training in facilitation is, therefore, recommended.

It is not part of your role, as facilitator, to teach the other members of the group. Rather, you guide the group through the session, ensuring everyone observes the ground rules and keeping the discussion focussed.

When the group is formed, think carefully about the participants. It is helpful to have a group consisting of members from various clinical backgrounds and with different levels of experience so that everyone can gain something from the session. It is important that all participants have experience of the topic being discussed and that the case is within their scope of practice so that they can offer that experience to the group.

As facilitator you must make sure that:

The session begins and finishes on time

It is important that the room is set up in a manner conducive to relaxed discussion before the session begins. Putting the chairs in a circle is non-threatening and helps to encourage conversation.

If you are using equipment, ensure that it is working before the meeting starts.

Ensure the group members are comfortable and have tea, coffee and water available.

Start the meeting on time. If people do not know each other, begin by asking everyone to introduce themselves briefly. You might consider an ice breaker to relax people at the beginning. You can find ideas for ice breakers on the internet. They include brainstorming ideas for the group, introducing each other, games, members telling the others something unusual about themselves.

Make sure group members understand the objectives of the session and know what the ground rules are.

Leave time at the end for the group to identify any areas of good practice or risks associated with the case and summarise what has been learnt. Then ask everyone to state briefly what they have learned individually and how they might put it into practice.

Before the end, provide participants with time to reflect in writing on what they have learned, how they will put it into practice and whether they need to follow up with further learning. This will allow them to transfer that reflection to the GOC's CET system and mean that the session has continued value for them.

Ask everyone in the group if they found the session helpful and whether it fulfilled their objectives so you know if it has to be adapted for next time. Ask how things might be done differently. Make sure everyone has a chance to contribute so if you know that one member has strong views, ask the others for their contributions first.

Ensure that the session finishes on time.

The ground rules are observed

- Members must listen to the person talking and not interrupt.
- Members must respect each others' views and contributions.
- Members may ask questions but should not interrogate the presenter.
- Members should not make derogatory remarks about the way the presenter handled the case or about the environment in which he or she works.
- Members should remain positive and should criticise constructively. Remind members of the principles of constructive feedback: Constructive feedback conveys the true degree of care for the recipient (before giving the feedback, put yourself in your other person's shoes to try to understand the effect of what you are going to say. Point out something that has been done well to build confidence). It is justifiable (give specific examples). It helps the other person identify what needs changing, by being honest and expressing thoughts clearly. Feedback must be based on fact, not value judgements.
- Members should not ask personal questions.
- All members should contribute.
- No member should dominate the discussion.
- Cases should be anonymised and everything should remain confidential and should not be discussed outside the group¹.

¹ If from the discussion you or other members of a group judge that someone's performance is so seriously impaired that it should be reported to the GOC, you should take on that task in line with the Code of Conduct. Remember that this is likely to be an extremely rare occurrence. Peer discussion groups should be places where practitioners can admit to uncertainties safely.

Group dynamics work well

It is your role to maintain energy and to maintain a non-threatening, supportive atmosphere. Peer discussion will not work if members of the group cannot trust each other. You must watch out for abuse of power and status, attempts to exclude members, non-participation and the overall atmosphere.

Do not allow other members to interrupt the presenter. Once he or she has finished, members may ask factual questions to clarify anything they do not understand. Encourage members to do this but make sure they do not move onto irrelevant matters. If necessary summarise to ensure that everyone is clear. You can use closed questions (requiring the answer 'yes' or 'no') to confirm or check for accuracy.

To clarify a point you might say 'could you explain that another way?'

Other ways of moving the discussion along might be to ask questions such as 'What evidence is there for that?', 'What would have happened if you had?', 'Is there another way of managing?...', 'What different tests could you have done?', 'What other approach could you have taken?', 'What else could you have included (in a record)?', 'Could you have included other useful information/excluded irrelevant information (in a referral)?', 'How could you have phrased that more clearly?'

To emphasise continuity in the discussion, you can say things such as 'You said earlier that...' or 'It seems as if ...'

Remember the patient in the discussions. Good communication skills can make a big difference to the success of a consultation. Poor communicators will not always obtain all the information they need and patients may leave having misunderstood what they should do. Encourage the group to consider how the practitioner had communicated with the patient. Did he or she ask the patient questions in a way which allowed all the correct information to be gathered?, did he or she explain things clearly and check understanding?, did he or she involve the patient in deciding on appropriate treatment?, did he or she think about how the patient might be feeling?

It is useful to discuss the importance of keeping good records. Lack of record keeping skills often plays a large part in impaired performance. Ask what records should be kept for the case under discussion – what should (and should not) be noted. Is the record adequate for another practitioner to take on the case in the future? If the case revolves around a referral, what information will the practitioner to whom the case is being referred need? Is the referral letter clear and concise?

It is important to foster an atmosphere of trust and openness so in the discussion period it is essential that members of the group adhere to the ground rules.

If you feel that someone is being negative or personal, rephrase the point he or she is making in more positive terms. Get the group to think in terms of positive solutions.

If you feel that a member of the group is cynical about the process, take the issues raised seriously and work through the implications towards a positive solution. Feed back on the way the comments were delivered.

If someone is dominating the group, thank them for their contribution and suggest seeking other views. Then direct questions to other members of the group. Use open questions such as those beginning with 'What, when, how or where' to encourage people's thoughts. 'Why?' can seem threatening and elicit defensiveness, so phrase such questions as follows: 'What were the steps that led you to...?' or 'What factors influenced your decision?'. If the person continues to dominate, say 'let's get everyone's thoughts out'.

Encourage timid members of the group to express a view point. One way of doing this is to ask them an easy question, and if possible ask someone sympathetic from the group a similar question first and immediately afterwards so the timid person does not feel put down.

Any major distress or disagreement should be tackled with those involved outside the session.

The discussion is focussed

If the discussion veers off the point or people make irrelevant contributions, summarise the discussion to that point and ask a question to re-focus the group.

Do not allow side conversations. Ask them to share what they are saying with the rest of the group.

Energy is maintained

Take a break. Get people to change seats. Reorder the topics for discussion so there is a change of emphasis.