

From: Bens, Ingrid [Facilitating with Ease!: A Step by Step Guidebook](#).  
Copyright 2000, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Published by Jossey-Bass, San Francisco  
Reprinted with Permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

## 1. Facilitation: Core Practices Overview

Regardless of which type of process you're facilitating, all facilitators need to be constantly using the core practices:

**Stay neutral on content** – your job is to focus on the *process* role and avoid the temptation of offering opinions about the topic under discussion. You should use questions and suggestions to offer ideas that spring to mind, but never impose opinions on the group.

**Listen actively** – look people in the eye, use attentive body language and paraphrase what they are saying. Always make eye contact with people while they speak, when paraphrasing what they have just said, and when summarizing their key ideas. Also use eye contact to let people know they can speak next, and to prompt the quiet ones in the crowd to participate.

**Ask questions** – this is the most important tool you possess. Questions test assumptions, invite participation, gather information, and probe for hidden points. Effective questioning allows you to delve past the symptoms to get at root causes.

**Paraphrase to clarify** – this involves repeating what people say to make sure they know they are being heard, to let others hear their points a second time, and to clarify key ideas. (i.e. “*Are you saying . . . ? Am I understanding you to mean . . . ?*”)

**Synthesize ideas** – don't just record individual ideas of participants. Instead, get people to comment and build on each other's thoughts to ensure that the ideas recorded on the flip chart represent collective thinking. This builds consensus and commitment. (i.e. “*Alice, what would you add to Jeff's comments?*”)

**Stay on track** – set time guidelines for each discussion. Appoint a time keeper inside the group to use a timer and call out milestones. Point out the digression if discussion has veered off topic. “*Park*” all off-topic comments and suggestions on a separate “Parking Lot” sheet posted on a nearby wall, to be dealt with later.

**Give and receive feedback** – periodically “*hold up a mirror*” to help the group “*see*” itself so it can make corrections. (i.e. “*Only two people are engaged in this discussion, while three others are reading. What's this telling us we need to do?*”) Also ask for and accept feedback about the facilitation. (i.e. “*Are we making progress? How's the pace? What can I do to be more effective?*”)

**Test assumptions** – you need to bring the assumptions people are operating under out into the open and clarify them, so that they are clearly understood by everyone. These assumptions may even need to be challenged before a group can explore new ground.

(i.e. “*John, on what basis are you making the comment that ‘Bob’s idea is too narrow in focus’?*”)

**Collect ideas** – keep track of both emerging ideas and final decisions. Make clear and accurate summaries on a flipchart or electronic board so everyone can see the notes. Notes should be brief and concise. They must always reflect what the participants actually said, rather than your interpretation of what they said. Or you may assign the roll of recorder to a group member.

**Summarize clearly** – a great facilitator listens attentively to everything that is said, and then offers concise and timely summaries. Summarize when you want to revive a discussion that has ground to a halt, or to end a discussion when things seem to be wrapping up.

**Label sidetracks** – it’s your responsibility to let the group members know when they’re off track. They can then decide to pursue the sidetrack, or stop their current discussion and get back to the agenda. (i.e. “*We are now discussing something that isn’t on our agenda. What does the group want to do?*”)

**Park it** – at every meeting, tape a flip chart sheet to a wall to record all sidetrack items. Later, these items can be reviewed for inclusion in a future agenda. “Parking lot” sheets let you capture ideas that may be important later, while staying on track.

**Use the spell-check button** – most people are nervous enough about writing on flip charts without having to worry that they’re spelling every word right. You’ll relax everyone by drawing a *spell-check button* at the top right corner of every flip sheet. Tell participants they “*can spell creatively, since pressing the spell-check button automatically eliminates all errors.*”

## Facilitation Process Flow Observation Sheet

Facilitator:	Observer's Comments:
Clarifies the purpose	
Creates buy-in for the proposed challenge	
Checks assumptions	
Makes sure there are norms	
Establishes the process	
Sets time frames	
Stays neutral and objective	
Paraphrases continuously	
Acts lively and positively	
Makes clear notes	
Asks good probing questions	
Makes helpful suggestions	
Encourages participation	
Addresses conflict	
Sets a good pace	
Checks the process	
Moves smoothly to new topics	
Makes clear and timely summaries	
Knows when to stop	