

# Tips for Holding Conversations

## Facilitating discussions

Facilitating discussions is a key skill for collaborative working and can be a powerful way to increase trust.

Good facilitation is basically about helping others to maximise their contribution in groups by creating a supportive environment.

This can happen 'formally' (e.g. when you are a dedicated group facilitator at an event), or less formally (e.g. to support a conversation or regular meeting to feel more productive).

This briefing pack gives hints and tips for making a success of facilitation.

## Useful when...

- You are designing and planning a meeting or discussion
- You are facilitating a conversation – formally or informally

## Aiming for...

- Setting the right tone – signalling that we are genuine about our desire to meaningfully involve colleagues and partners in the shaping of our future
- Building rapport and trust - making other people feel at ease, comfortable and welcomed in the discussion
- Stimulating thinking and conversation
- Hearing a range of perspectives - making sure that everyone can share their thinking
- Spotting what really matters – i.e. catch on to when something potentially powerful is being said and draw it out for elaboration
- Keeping discussions focussed on the major questions and topics

## Planning the discussion: Conscious design

- It is important to design the structure and environment with clear sense of purpose and intention.
- Authentic conversation is less likely to occur in a climate of fear, mistrust, or hierarchical power dynamics or control. This means that the way you set up a discussion is as important as the question you ask. Facilitating meetings, workshops and conversations in a way that enhances trust and reduces fear will lead to much richer discussions and deeper insights. Encourage people to leave egos, labels and titles at the (virtual) door. Avoid hierarchies by supporting connection from the start from a place of shared empathy rather than seniority, e.g. by sharing our shared hopes and fears for the next ten years, rather than by talking about our formal roles.
- Whose voice do you need in the room? In designing and planning the conversation, consider who you want to hear from, what you know about them and what would help them to fully participate.
- We want to hear different perspectives so consider who you haven't heard from before, how GM Moving may be relevant to them and their work. Why would they join the conversation, what is in it for them?
- What kind of space do you want to create and what will that take? Consider how you are going to run the discussion and hold the space to create conditions for a good discussion and for diverse voices to be heard

## Facilitation Skills

### Active listening

- You'd be amazed how little we genuinely listen to people.
- We all tend to jump to conclusions, fill in the blanks ourselves, make huge assumptions on the basis of our own experiences and filters, and often are just plain distracted.
- Active Listening is a technique that forces you to try and genuinely understand what the other person **MEANS** (not just what they say!)
- It's not a complicated idea but it is difficult in practice. It takes your full attention and is much easier to do if you have learnt your key questions to ask, beforehand.
- Listening with all your senses!
  - Reflect back what you **hear them say** (it's fine to just plain repeat their own words) – e.g. *'So, I'm hearing that you feel the community could have been consulted more?'*
  - Notice and reflect back their **tone of voice, body language, emotion** e.g. *'this seems like something that is very exciting for you' or 'I can see you had a reaction to that suggestion'*
  - Notice and reflect back any **contradictions, or things they're not saying** e.g. *'I noticed that earlier you said X, but now I'm getting the impression that you now think Y' or 'I get the impression this isn't something you feel comfortable to talk about'*

### Stepping outside of the discussion – playing the role of a neutral facilitator

- If you are the facilitator, you need to temporarily 'step outside' of the discussion to be an objective and active listener. This can be especially hard if you are typically seen as an expert or an authority
- Assert your role as facilitator rather than contributor at the start. Explain that this may mean that it seems that you're asking 'obvious' questions or that you are not entering into debate, but that is because you are in listening mode.
- Be aware of your own 'buttons' – think through what will get a reaction from you beforehand (this will help you not to react in the discussion) e.g. someone may express views you disagree with or that make you uncomfortable – don't react defensively. Instead, paraphrase back what they have said, and focus on further questions to try to understand why they have said it.
- Try not to correct or openly challenge other people's views in this context – even if you think a participant is factually wrong (as this will make people nervous to comment and close down other people's contributions).

### Asking powerful questions

Great conversations that reveal insightful things are normally started by powerful questions. Powerful questions open the door to dialogue and discovery. We want to ask powerful open questions to uncover what really matters to people and partners, and why so we can unlock great conversations about our future.

### Useful when...

- You want to take the opportunity to bring up the GM Moving future strategy in any conversations or discussions
- You want to better understand someone or a group of people and how they think or feel
- You're in a situation when you want to signal that you're in 'listening mode'
- You need to shift the conversation from the day-to-day or 'status quo' to 'bigger picture' or more reflective and exploratory

- You want to create a situation where people are exposed to a range of perspectives and viewpoints beyond their own to challenge mindsets
- Trying to open up a tricky issue in a way that doesn't lead to conflict or blame

## Aiming for...

- Setting the right tone – signalling that we are genuine about our desire to meaningfully involve colleagues and partners in the shaping of our future
- Sparking thought – shifting the conversation to a focus on the possibilities
- Reflecting at a deeper level – getting beyond the 'here and now' priorities to the 'big issues'
- Uncovering insight – gathering experiences, stories and perspectives from our partners that give us important insights into the things that matter about our future strategy

## Creating powerful questions

Anyone can create the powerful questions that open up a good discussion. They typically take some prior thought though – rather than coming from thin air in the moment. Some things to consider when you're creating questions include:

- **Choice of words** – keep it simple, clear, concise and plain English. Consider the difference between:
  - 'What are the key opportunities that we can envision going forward?' and...
  - 'What is possible here?'
- **Relevance** - invites and challenges you to think deeply about an issue but within the realms of possibility and relevance to the discussion. People will typically be most engaged around a question that relates to something that they have some control over. Consider the difference in how useful it would feel to take on the following questions:
  - How can we best manage this situation?
  - How can we best manage our partnership?
  - How can we best manage our company?
  - How can we best manage the economy?
- **Open vs closed** – questions that lead to discussion need to open with interrogatives – especially; 'why, how, what' and also 'who, when, where?' If a question can be answered with a 'yes' or 'no' response, it will not generate a deep discussion. Open questions allow a totally free response and encourage people to contribute more. Consider the difference between:
  - Are you satisfied with our working relationship?
  - When have you been most satisfied with our working relationship?
  - What is it about our working relationship that you find most satisfying?
  - Why might it be that that our working relationship has had its ups and downs?
- **Generate energy** – questions that draw on people's experiences, values, hopes and ideals lead to discussions that are energising for everyone involved. People are more energised by questions that open up possibilities rather than dwelling on negatives. This can still apply to challenging questions about things that have not gone well. Consider the difference between:
  - "What did we do wrong and who is responsible?"
  - "What can we learn from what's happened and what possibilities do we now see?"
- **Train attention to what really matters.** The tips below can help:
  - Ask one question at a time, pay attention to the wording of the question to make sure it is right.

- Allow silence whilst people think. You know the questions well but they don't – they need processing time
- Spot what really matters! A key skill in the discussion is to listen intently and pick up on the examples/thoughts/ideas that feel like they hold real potential and resonate with people. i.e. catch on to when something potentially powerful is being said and draw it out for elaboration *E.g. 'That idea seemed to resonate with a lot of people – can you talk more about that? What has that provoked in other people?'*

## Example powerful questions

You are probably the best person to create the most powerful questions for any conversation you are having, because you understand the context and the people. However, here are a list of open questions that are likely to work in most circumstances:

To explore vision for the future, e.g our hopes for GM Moving In Action for the next 10 years

- What had real meaning for you from what you've heard today?
- What are your hopes and fears for our future strategy and the way we develop it?
- What would you like to have happen?
- What is most important to you about the strategy and why do you care about it?
- What would it look like if we were entirely successful?
- How would you describe to your friends and family what we are seeking to achieve?
- What is possible here?
- If you were entirely in charge, what changes would you make?
- What is so important to you about GM Moving that you'd do almost anything to defend it?

To explore what people are experiencing and learning, e.g. around how we best achieve our vision together.

- What do we know so far / still need to learn?
- What are the dilemmas that we face?
- What obstacles do we face? And how have you/we responded to them to date?
- What can we learn from what's happened and what possibilities do we now see?

To explore alternative perspectives and gaps or ways to shift mindsets

- What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs than we do say about what we do?
- What are some of the ways we might be unintentionally making the situation worse?
- What's missing from this picture so far? What is it we're not seeing?
- What important questions have not been asked yet?
- What would it take to change this issue?

To explore the roles that we and they might have around an issue

- How can we support each other in taking the necessary steps?
- What unique contribution can we each make?
- What is the commitment that you would feel comfortable to make on this?

## Note-taking and time keeping

It is best if the facilitator is not also trying to take the notes and time-keep. Where possible arrange for other people in the group to take on these roles. This means the facilitator can focus on listening and asking questions.

### Top tips for note-taker:

Try to record the key words, language, key phrases people are using rather than interpret and note in your own words.

Where appropriate make a note of any key quotes, and who said them, so we have the option to go back to people and seek permission to quote them if that feels helpful. Comments should not otherwise be attributed and notes with people's names must not be shared outside of the team without express permission.

### Top tips for time-keeper:

Make sure you are clear as to how long you have for the session. Where possible, agree with the facilitator how you will let them know whether the conversation needs to be moved on.

Be clear at the start that you have the role of time keeper, that way you have the permission of the group to interrupt and help move things along so you can do your job properly.

## Tips and traps

There are some common challenges/difficulties that can arise when you're facilitating a discussion. These can be easily dealt with if you're prepared for them (particularly with practice):

- **The discussion is good - but you can't keep up with facilitating and capturing detailed notes:**
  - It's better if the person learning the discussion is NOT the main note taker!
  - If you are facilitating, you will probably want to write down important things / phrases / names / issues you might want to come back to later but not full notes.
  - People don't mind waiting a second while you write a note of something important to come back to – but you need to avoid being disengaged / head in notes / hidden behind a laptop; it signals you aren't fully listening!
  
- **Someone talks too much, and/or goes off-topic:**
  - Set expectations up at the start – e.g. *'please don't be offended if I interrupt, it's just so we cover everything relevant in the time we have!'*
  - If they digress, give them a moment, but then steer them back
  - It's your discussion – so feel free to move people or topics along when needed (warmly)
  
- **Someone talks too little:**
  - Acknowledge this and explore why – e.g. *'can I ask you what you're thinking, feeling at the moment?' or 'I'm really interested in hearing a bit more though'*
  - If the discussion is not flowing, asking further questions might help (please see thought starter questions in the 'Powerful Questions' tool).
  
- **People use technical language, jargon or doesn't explain what they mean in enough detail:**
  - You will probably know what the relevant jargon means!
  - However, if there is a risk that other people don't know what they mean and are too nervous to ask
  - There is also a tendency for people to 'hide behind' jargon, to avoid saying what they really think...

- Set up the fact that we want to avoid jargon, at the start, i.e. sometimes it makes the true situation less clear
- Clarify as you go through – ask people to say full names of things or what they mean by jargon
- **The discussion is only just getting going when you run out of time:**
  - It takes longer than we think to really dig into our thoughts and ideas and get going with discussions
  - Often the depth and detail comes out later in a discussion when trust has built and thoughts have been stimulated
  - Some practical ways to manage this:
    - It can help to encourage people to think about relevant things before you speak to them – e.g. sending over the key questions and asking people to come prepared with some thoughts.
    - Try to set up longer time slots than you may actually need. It's better for a conversation to be shorter than planned than to run out of time.
    - Recognise where a conversation needs to be continued and commit to another conversation
- **Some people are frustrated that the discussion has not allowed them to express views that are important to them:**
  - Some people come to a conversation with a burning idea or thing that they want to get off their chest
  - If you think this may be the case – you can open up or close a discussion with 1 min of uninterrupted time for each person in the discussion to articulate their major ideas or the one burning thing they want to say
  - You can steer the rest of the discussion with your prepared questions
- **People recognise you as an 'expert' or as a representative of GM Moving and direct all their questions to you:**
  - It can help to establish your role at the outset of the discussion – that you are there to facilitate and hear from everyone else and not chip in with your own views
  - You may need to give some brief clarifications – e.g. an important date or milestone – use your judgement
  - Try not to get drawn into the discussion – it can help to remind people that the reason you are there is to hear the views of others. A simple way of doing this is turning any questions directed towards you back to the room for their perspectives.
  - Don't be afraid to say, '*we don't know yet!*' We are being honest when we say we don't yet have all the answers. That's why we're holding discussions like these. Referring to the strategy development process will give people confidence of when we expect to have formed the answers to their questions.