

Facilitator's guide for running a study group

What is my role as facilitator?

Your role is to keep the discussion on track and productive and to create an environment for fruitful discussion, the sharing of ideas, and the exploration of different approaches to the issue. As a facilitator, you are generally responsible for the following:

Introducing the topic

- Maintaining organisation and time in the session
- Confirming the aims and objectives
- Creating an open forum for discussion
- Leading and encouraging discussion
- Asking open-ended questions to stimulate thought
- Making sure everyone has an opportunity to participate
- Reinforcing and clarifying the content
- Helping participants to reflect on the outcomes of the session...What have we learned? What will I do differently? What else do I need to know?

How do I run a facilitated discussion session?

- At the beginning of the discussion, introduce yourself, if necessary, and set a positive tone for the session
- State your role/position, goals and what you hope the session will achieve

- Make the group objective clear before the conversation begins – the group must agree on this before it can move on to generate alternatives or an action plan
- Encourage participation by opening with an ice-breaker that gets the participants talking early in the session
- Ask someone to volunteer to be your “what have we learned” reporter for the end of the session
- Make sure you are knowledgeable about the topic and feel comfortable with people questioning your sources of information
- If you are asked a question that is beyond your expertise, offer alternative strategies and resources
- Your role is not to lecture or answer the questions. Don't be judgmental – allow everyone to express their views so that they will feel comfortable about contributing to the discussion
- Do not accept answers such as “I would ring the Law Society.” Turn those kinds of answers around by saying, “You're the Law Society. What would you tell the lawyer in this case?”
- In closing, summarise the discussion and ask the volunteer to give the “what have we learned” report. Then emphasize one or two key points. Remind participants to complete their CPD plans by adding the outcomes as they see them and reflecting on their further learning needs.
- Stick to timelines.

How do I encourage discussion among group members?

One of your main responsibilities is to encourage discussion of the issues. There are several ways to do this, including acting as a devil's advocate to encourage conflicting opinions. You can also offer real-world scenarios and examples. Be sure to ask lots of open-ended and follow-up questions, such as:

- What would happen if ...?
- What facts would you use to show ...?
- What approach would you use to ...?
- How would you use ...?
- What inference can you make ...?
- What is the relationship between ...?
- What evidence can you find ...?
- What things justify ...?
- What could be changed to improve ...?
- How would you test ...?
- What way would you design ...?
- What outcome would you predict for ...?
- How could you select ...?
- How could you prove ...?
- How would you prioritize ...?
- What information would you use to support ...?

How do I handle challenging group members?

The **over-talker** has plenty to say and likes to be the first person to say it. Remind everyone in the that it is an equal participation group so if you have 5 people in the group, you want each person to contribute 20% to the discussion. If the problem continues, talk to the person outside of the group and ask for help in getting some of the other members to contribute more.

The **non-talker** is the quieter person in the group who doesn't say much. Try calling on him or her periodically to contribute and provide lots of affirmation for the contribution.

The **tangent-starter** can quickly get the group off track. Feel free to allow the person to go off on these tangents once in a while but then firmly bring the group back on track. If this becomes a problem, speak with the person outside of the group and express your appreciation for their contribution. Share with them the challenges you have in facilitating the group, and ask for help in keeping it on track.

The **insensitive person** gives advice, makes fun of answers and other people, cuts people off or does other things that may offend group members. This person is detrimental to the group. Remind everyone of group guidelines and speak with this person outside of the group and offer advice on how he or she can be a better group member.

Keep in mind that **young lawyers** may feel too intimidated to speak for fear of getting it wrong. Be especially encouraging of them and be sure to affirm their participation.

What are the signs of a successful facilitated discussion?

- Each member of the group contributes
- Only one member of the group speaks at a time and the others actively listen
- Members are prompt and come prepared
- The group stays on topic
- Members are free to ask questions and provide constructive criticism

Is facilitating a study group an eligible activity for the CPD Requirement?

Yes, providing the topics discussed are related to your identified learning needs. You may count the time spent facilitating the group and a reasonable amount of preparation time. You would need to document your role and the time spent and reflect upon the outcomes in the usual way. You could document your preparation by keeping a record of the time you spent, your notes, the details of the meeting including your role, and a list of participants.

(Adapted from material prepared by the Law Society of Upper Canada with the kind permission of that Society.)