Experiences in Facilitating Large Public Events

Tip Sheets for Effective Results

Prepared by the Community Development Unit
of Alberta Culture and Tourism

This content of this document is drawn from the experiences of the Community Development Unit staff in designing and facilitating large and often complex public and stakeholder engagement events for the non-profit sector and the Government of Alberta.

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Outline

Definitions

Aim intention or purpose of the event, the reason it is being held. In the context of these Tips, can also be the Goals or the Objectives.

ALF - Assistant Lead Facilitator a person who acts on behalf of, supports, and is directly accountable to the Lead Facilitator. In the context of these **Tips**, a person who is a highly competent, experienced and skilled facilitator, and able to independently lead and coach other facilitators.

Deliverables data conveyed by the Lead Facilitator to the client, the product of the event discussions. Also a narrative on the change experienced by participants provided through verbal and written evaluations to the Lead Facilitator and through him, to the client.

Goals specified end toward which all efforts of the event are directed. In the context of these tips, can also be the aim or objective.

Objectives object(s) to be achieved collectively by participants and perceptible by all. In the context of these tips, can also be the Goal(s).

Outcomes result or product. Something(s) specific that follow as a consequence of an activity. In the context of these tips, and specific to the duration of the Event itself, used interchangeably with Outputs and Results.

Outputs something produced through the process, the act, the result of the act. In the context of these tips, can also be used interchangeably with Outcomes and Results.

Public Input Event an occasion where input to a topic is received, verbally and/or in writing from members of the public at large.

Public Participation Event an event where an exchange of information from public at large, stakeholders, and clients occurs. Decision making occurs at a variety of levels, and with various intentions.

Results outcome or consequence, effect or conclusion. In the context of these tips, can be used interchangeably with Outcomes and Outputs.

Service Agreement a verbal or written contract freely entered by both parties. An explicit agreement between the Lead Facilitator, as appointed by the Ministry of Culture, and the client which outlines clearly what they expect from each other and how they are going to work together.

Getting Started

1. Know the Client

Building a good relationship with the client contacts is important to the success of the event. You must earn their trust and establish good channels of communication in order to have the most effective public participation process.

There is a fine line between not knowing enough about the client and becoming too familiar. In the first case, you risk not meeting the client's needs. In the second, you may become so close you can lose your perspective and objectivity in designing and delivering the input process.

- Know the official, registered name of the client organization and all of the organizational contact information (mailing address, email, web site, Facebook page, Twitter handle, phone and fax numbers, etc.).

- Know the names and contact information of any other affiliated group(s) that will be involved in the event or will be directly impacted by the outcomes of the event.

- Know the names and contact information of the main and alternate contact person(s) for the above organizational entities.

- Be clear about the contact person(s) relationship with the client (and affiliated) organization(s).

- Understand the contact person's authority to make decisions for the organization with regard to the event.

- Meet at least once, in person, with the main contact(s), and if possible, with other significant people in the organization to discuss their request for facilitation services and the event in general.

2. Understand the Request

You can't know too much about the purpose of the public participation event. While it is critical that the event be planned in such a way that the participants have a rewarding experience, the first accountability is to the client and meeting the client's organizational needs.

You need to know what the expected "deliverables" are for the event, why they are important to the client and how the client will use the outcomes of the public input.

- Understand what the client wants to achieve and why.
- Know what the event is about and understand the basics about the topic area.
- Have some knowledge of the history of this event or other events leading up to it.
- Know the current concerns and opportunities in the topic area.
- Have a clear understanding of what decisions, if any, participants will be expected to make about the topic area.
- Know what other outputs are expected.
- Know how the outputs of the process will be used after the event.
- Understand the time-frames for the proposed event and the ultimate deliverables.

3. The Lead Facilitator

The Lead Facilitator has the most important role in the overall facilitation of the project. This person must be greatly competent and is, ultimately, responsible for the success of the event. It is essential that the Lead Facilitator work closely with the client organization and contacts but not to the point of becoming one of them. A sense of objectivity must be retained in order for the best process and the most meaningful experience for participants.

The Lead Facilitator must have a special set of skills and credentials:

- Knowledgeable in all of the principles and practices involved in public participation processes
- Knowledgeable of a broad range of facilitation methods
- Sound communications and public relations skills

The Lead Facilitator is responsible for

- negotiating a working relationship with the client on behalf of the facilitation team,
- working closely with the client in planning and delivering the event,
- designing the process and the schedule of the event,
- providing and overseeing the facilitation staff,
- working with the client to coordinate all the different players during the event (client representatives, security, media, speakers, presenters, staff, politicians, etc.),
- managing the overall process at the event including the opening and the closing plenary session, and
- delivering the data generated at the event to the client.

The Lead Facilitator must have

- a clear understanding of accountabilities and lines of communication;
- early face-to-face meetings with the client contacts to build relationships and trust, share information, and learn more about the client's intended outcomes;
- a clear vision of a successful event; and
- a clear calendar in order to have the time, especially at both the beginning and the end of the project, to focus the necessary attention and energy on the project.

Note that the Lead Facilitator never facilitates small groups during the large event. His/her attention must always be clearly focused on the event as a whole and on seeing the big picture of the event.

4. Sign a Service Agreement

The terms and parameters of the service agreement or contract with the client are critical to the success of the public participation event. The focus of the contract on results, roles, budget and other aspects of the project help keep everyone involved on track. There can be many variables and contingencies in large public events; the agreement and its terms will keep the lead facilitator and the team from straying too far from what is expected and the client from changing expectations mid-stream. When events succeed, or fail, examination will often lead back to the contracting stage where the service agreement is set up.

- Make sure the expected results are clearly stated and agreed to by all parties.

- Clearly identify and agree to the outputs of the event.
    - Content goals i.e., what results does the client need *from* the participants?
        - What topics addressed by them,
        - What information provided by them,
        - What levels of decision-making by them, etc.
    - Experiential results i.e., what results does the client want *for* the participants?
        - What information provided to them,
        - What learning experience available to them,
        - What influence they can have on upper-level decision-making, etc.
    - Provision of all event data and the format for it

- Clearly define the roles of the client, the lead facilitator, the facilitation team and other support players in the event.

- Be specific in outlining the lead facilitator's and the facilitation team's resources and limitations in carrying out their role.
    - Time
    - Human resources
    - Technical resources
    - Costs and expenses

- Clearly define who will cover what financial costs for all aspects of the event.

- Specify the time-frame for design and delivery of the event in the service agreement.

5. Selecting the Participants

It is usually up to the client to select and invite the participants to a public input event. However, if the lead facilitator can have some influence, it is useful to guide the client in selecting the participants in a manner which is appropriate to the purpose of the event. The participants should reflect the "community" that is impacted by or interested in the issue being addressed at the event.

Make sure that the number of participants selected or invited is appropriate for the

- intended outcomes of the event,
- size/capacity of the facility that may be used,
- budget,
- process, and
- number of staff available to facilitate the process.

Note that more people do not necessarily increase the "productivity" or quality of the input.

Help the client determine whether participants should be

- stakeholders (individuals or organizations that play an important role in the topic area or possess expertise in the topic),
- citizens/public at large (general citizens interested in the topic or impacted by it); or
- from both sectors above.

Encourage a broad range of "community" representation, depending on the topic.

- Seniors
- Youth
- Young and middle age adults
- Aboriginal people
- Other cultural and ethnic groups
- Persons with disabilities
- Rural residents
- Urban residents
- Individuals from various socio-economic levels
- Special interest groups

6. Know the Participants

The more you can know about the participants, the better you will be able to create a relevant and valuable experience for them and for the client. Being aware of, acknowledging and understanding the range of emotions and motivations at play before and during the event and responding to these through carefully designed process is a measure of success.

- Know the history behind the event.
    - Have consultations on the topic been held in the past?
- Determine whether participants will self-select to come to the event or will be invited or a combination of both.
    - What is their level of interest in the issue?
- Know whether participants will be citizens at large or stakeholders or both.
    - What will be their commitment to the topic, the client and/or the process?
- Be clear on the diversity of perspectives expected from the participants who will attend.
    - How broad will the cross-section of “community” be?
- Find out what kind and level of information and understanding of the topic or issue the participants will have.
    - How much educating on the topic or issue both before and during the event will you have to do?
- Know what level of trust exists between the participants and the client.
- Determine what the participants’ expectations of the event will be.
    - Do the participants believe they can make a difference in the issue?
- Learn about any physical, emotional, cultural, or other kinds of factors that might affect how effectively participants can engage in the process and/or the event as a whole.
- Try to predict what other kinds of dynamic tensions might come into play between participants or between the participants and the client.

If there are smaller, local or regional events on this topic being held before this large event, make sure you have access to all the information from those events. This will also assist you in knowing participants’ interest in and understanding of the topic.

7. The Venue

It is usually up to the client to arrange for the venue in which to deliver the public participation event. It needs to be done early in the planning stages as so many elements of the event depend on the quality of the space. The attributes and limitations of the facility may determine how many participants can be invited and accommodated, the duration of the event, the design of the process, the number and size of small discussion groups, and planning the program including making enough time for participants to move from room to room and allowing for appropriate breaks and meals.

- It is important to know the
    - size of the space for plenary sessions;
    - number and size of rooms for breakout sessions and their distance from the plenary room;
    - availability of facility support staff;
    - availability of IT, audio and other technical support staff;
    - availability of technology (e.g., microphones, projectors, screens, etc.)
    - type and number of available tables;
    - availability and utility of wall space (for process materials);
    - location of windows and any barriers such as pillars and doors;
    - location of electrical outlets (for AV equipment, laptops, telephones, etc.) and charging stations (for cell phones, tablets, etc.);
    - availability of wireless internet access for presenters and participants;
    - pathways and supports for participants to move from place to place (hallways, stairwells, elevators, etc.);
    - supports for people with unique physical and other needs;
    - proximity of hotels, public transportation and other necessary services for participants, facilitators and other individuals involved in the event;
    - availability of parking;
    - availability and support for food services including ability to provide meals for those with special diets; and
    - fire escapes and exit routes to assist people who might fall ill or need other emergency attention.

- Provide written information and maps for all staff working at the event which will inform them about:
    - the location of all on-site working spaces,
    - the ways to contact site managers or attendants for facility issues such as room temperature or furniture requirements,
    - the ways to contact personnel to assist in any emergency situation, and
    - the ways and times when breakout rooms will be available to facilitators for process preparation and set-up.

8. Event Context

Laying good groundwork for the event during the pre-planning stage contributes to the success of the event and makes for a more stress-free experience for everyone. Looking after all of the logistics and contingencies that surround the process of the event involves running through the event from start to finish many times, in your head and in writing, to anticipate and be ready for any possibility.

Communications

- Know what information is being given to the participants by the client before or at the event (advertisements, questionnaires, workbooks, other handouts, etc.).

- Know how social media tools are being used leading up to, during, and after the event.

- Know who the public relations people are for the client and how to reach them in situations during the event involving special guests, VIP's, media issues and any potential or real public disturbance.

- Have an agreement and clear written policy developed with the client and client staff with regard to working with media. Find the fine line between guarding the participants' privacy and keeping the process open and transparent.

- Make sure that a staff person connected with the client serves as the media contact. The media contact should not be the lead facilitator.

- Have an agreement and develop a clear policy with the client with regard to observers during the event. Observers should listen only; they should not participate in the conversations.

On-Site Resources

- Have an agreement and develop a clear policy with the client with regard to resource people attending the event. These people are observers who will speak briefly, when asked, to provide essential information and/or clarity to a discussion.

Managing Data

- Have an agreement with the client with regard to the handling of the data generated during the event. Once a decision is made, have the appropriate space, technology and/or staff ready for the task.
    - For large events the lead facilitator and assigned facilitators are not always responsible for doing the report on the data; it is negotiable based on the resources of the client. For example, often the client provides this service (i.e. client recorders at the table writing either on paper or directly into lap tops) and after the event they turn this data into the final report.

9. Back-Up

Have a “Plan B” for everything. Have the confidence going into the event that all will go as planned and rest secure in the knowledge that you have back-up plans ready in case they don’t.

- Have back-up and contingency plans in place for everyone and every possibility.
  - Problems in the facility, especially in break-out rooms
    - Noise
    - Room size
    - Temperature
    - Location of break-out rooms
    - Electrical and technological malfunctions
    - Other unexpected events that make a room unavailable
  - Problems with equipment
    - Have several extra laptops, phones, extension cords, etc.
    - Make sure staff in the facility are ready to back-up any technical malfunctions in the building
  - Problems with supplies
    - Have extras of everything (pens, markers, flip charts, paper, etc.) both in break-out rooms and in a central place where they can be quickly accessed
  - Problems with staff
    - Have extra people on-site for facilitation and/or any other kind of support in case someone falls sick or cannot make it for any reason
    - It is wise to work throughout the project with an assistant lead facilitator who can easily step in should the lead facilitator be unable to attend or finish the event
  - Problems with participants
    - Client staff and the lead facilitator should be able, quickly, to regroup the participants in small discussion rooms if attendance issues result in unbalanced group sizes or if a room becomes unavailable

Designing the Process

10. Process Design

Designing good process for public participation is not just about getting the information from the participants that will satisfy the needs of the client. The *science* of process design will guide you in choosing appropriate methods and technologies to achieve the expected outcomes. The *art* of process design will help you bring a creative approach to working with the participants in a way that makes their experience rewarding and meaningful for them as they provide the necessary input. Bottom line: one tool does not fit all applications.

- Review all the things you learned from the client when you received and sought to understand the request (reference tip sheet #2 on page 5 of this booklet).
    - Clearly understand the outcomes and outputs expected by the client.

- Know what “hot spots” or other sensitive circumstances exist which might affect the process and its delivery.

- Define the level and kind of decision-making that will be necessary by participants in the input process.

- If there will be an education component at the event, decide the mechanism by which information will be delivered to participants: workbook; speakers; etc.

- Know what logistics must be taken into account in designing the process.
    - Size of the facility
    - Number and size of the break-out rooms/groups
    - Time available for the different elements of the process

- Understand the level of relationship building that will be necessary for the process to be a success.
    - Who are the people who need to connect?
    - How much time should be provided for people to properly connect?

- Work with a design team in developing the process or vet the design with a group of colleagues.

- Test the process, if possible, with a small group of client representatives to check for timing and effectiveness of the methodology.

11. Event Program Schedule

Having a written program schedule or agenda provides a valuable tool for everyone involved in a public participation event. In the full energy of the event, it is often the one thread that connects the many parts. Designing the flow of activities in the program of the event is critically important in getting the best results from the participants and in making the experience both pleasant and relevant for them. Trying to squeeze too many outputs from given timeframes often backfires with poor results.

- Provide for the most effective use of everyone's time to ensure that both the client's and participants' expectations are met and that outcomes are successfully achieved.

- Plan the schedule so that there is a good flow to the activities of the event. Take into account:
  - participants' learning and need for information,
  - the need to match activities such as listening to speakers or active discussion to the times of the day most suitable to the energy levels of the participants, and
  - that participants will work best if the tasks are not complicate (avoid asking them to do too many things at once).

- Provide adequate or appropriate time for *all* the activities in the event including speakers and other presentations, small group discussions and work, meals, breaks, reporting, as well as movement by participants from activity to activity.

- Build time into the agenda for participants to relax, network and socialize.

- Provide different versions of the written program schedule: one for the client, one for the participants, and a third, more detailed one, for the facilitators and other staff.

- Make sure that each draft of the program schedule is dated and/or numbered to ensure that everyone is working from the most current draft.

12. Using Break-out Groups/Rooms

Having participants in a large public participation event work in small break-out groups gives them the best opportunity to contribute to the process and be as actively engaged in the event as possible. The most creative thinking, speaking and listening occurs in small, hospitable spaces where the participants feel most comfortable. Every attempt should be made to have each small group work in isolated rooms or spaces where they are not disturbed by other conversations or activities.

- Determine the number of break-out rooms you'll use according to:
    - the number of workable spaces available in the venue, and
    - the number of staff you will have to facilitate small groups.

- The number of people that the break-out rooms will comfortably accommodate will determine how many people you can have in the rooms, but try not to exceed about twenty people in each group. Fifteen is an ideal number for the most productive work in small groups. The groups need to be large enough to provide diversity of opinion but not so large as to limit each person's opportunity to speak.

- Since the client organization mostly likely will receive registrations to the event, it makes sense to have them also divide participants into the small break-out groups. Points to consider include:
    - having the break-out group indicated by a coloured dot or some other convenient indicator on the participants' name tag for the event;
    - creating, if at all possible, a good cross-section in each small group of gender, age, geographic, ethnic or any other relevant demographic mix; and
    - considering whether it makes sense to have any of the small groups be homogenous by geography, by topic or by affiliation.
        - For example, the impact of just a few youth at a large event may be more effective if the youth are kept together in their own group rather than spreading them out in the other groups. On the other hand, the impact of even one young person in a group of adults can be significant.

- Know, as much as possible, if participants are coming with "special" circumstances or interests. It is important for facilitators to be aware of people in their break-out rooms with strong feelings about the topic, special agendas, or who might need to be especially encouraged to participate or to participate with and through others (e.g. persons who are deaf or blind).

- Build time at the beginning of the first small break-out group session to allow for introductions, housekeeping details, working principles and to begin to establish relationships and a comfort level amongst the participants and with their group facilitator (reference tip sheet #21 on page 24 of this booklet).

- Allow time at the end of the last small break-out group session for the small groups to wind up and bring closure to their work together (reference tip sheet #23 on page 26 of this booklet).

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13. Speakers/Presenters

Speakers or presenters can be a nice enhancement to a large public participation event. Their messages must be clearly aligned with the topic of the event; speakers or presenters must not be there just to fill time. The program schedule should provide participants a good mix of listening and small group work; too much time spent in one or the other activity is counterproductive.

- Provide time for speakers or presenters in order to
  - set context for the event or for individual parts of the event,
  - provide an educational component or critical information, and
  - provide thought-provoking ideas from a variety of viewpoints.

- Make sure that all speakers or presenters know clearly what their role is in supporting the event.

- Be clear and firm about how much time speakers or presenters have been allotted. A maximum of one hour is a good guideline.

- Come to an agreement with speakers or presenters about whether a question and answer period will occur and how much time will be allotted for that.

- Speakers who are not providing content-related information but who, for example, are bringing greetings should be clearly encouraged to stick to firm time guidelines.

- Make sure that speakers or presenters who have technological elements to support their talk have tested the equipment before their part in the event and are ready to go on time.

- Speakers or presenters who have hard-copy handouts for the participants should be given participant numbers well enough in advance in order to have enough copies for everyone.
  - Alternatively, handouts can be provided to participants electronically via the client, saving time and paper production costs for everyone. Informing participants of this material availability at the start of the presentation is required.

- Try to avoid scheduling speakers or presenters at times during the event when participants may be weary. For example, don't have a long presentation right after lunch.

14. Report-Backs

Report-backs held during a plenary session at the end of a large public participation event help to bring closure after the great expenditure of energy during the event. They summarize the work done and bring a sense of accomplishment and decision-making to the experience. Report-backs from the small group discussions are a useful way to honour the work done by the participants and validate that work by publicly acknowledging it. That said, report-backs must be brief and carefully managed.

- Recognize that the participants' energy will be waning by the end of the event and their tolerance for sitting and listening will be diminished.

- Make every attempt to have the entire report-back session last a maximum of half an hour.

- Make the report-back process complete enough that participants will be reassured that their work will go somewhere and be useful in addressing the topic of the event.

- If participants are doing the report backs, facilitators from the small groups may have to coach and assist their reporters in being properly prepared.
    - Provide time in the event program schedule for facilitators to help their reporters prepare their report-back so that it is clear and succinct.
    - The process in the small groups should be designed to include an opportunity for each group to reach a consensus with their reporter on what material will be included in the report-back.

- Small group facilitators may provide the report-back for their group if there is any fear the report-back session will go long otherwise or if it is determined that participants are so emotionally-connected to the work that they may not be able to provide a quick, succinct overview.

- If the event is long and much work will be generated, a report-back process may be put into the program schedule at the end of definite breaks in the program. There could be a report-back, for example, at the end of the morning session as well as at the end of the afternoon.

15. Process Contingencies

In addition to "Plan A" and "Plan B" have a "Plan C". Contingency Plan. Plan "C" takes effect if an emergency occurs or an existing situation changes. Do not be complacent to the small probability of the highly improbable. Be vigilant; be prepared to adjust to the most serious and the most minor disruptions. Those disruptions that were never expected had the potential for huge impact and weren't explainable until after they had occurred.

- Plan C is different from Plan B (reference tip sheet #9 on page 12 of this booklet). Plan B is about back up for the mostly known. Plan C is about back up for the unknown.

- When the process has been finalized, stand back to ponder all unanticipated interruptions. Then develop a plan, a "what if" procedure, that will sustain the process through these emergencies to its successful conclusion.
  - Thinking about what might occur, prepares one for action when a situation change does occur as you are minimizing the surprise.

- Start by minimizing the risk of disruption at the very beginning of the event by clearly explaining the process to all present.
  - This important context piece will inform participants of
    - how the discussions will take place,
    - what outcomes are intended,
    - what decisions if any they are being asked to make, and
    - how their input will be used.
  - This ensures that everyone is starting at the same place, so when a situation change occurs, adjustments to the process can be made, and everyone can shift gears without losing focus on the intended results.

- Understand that one of the most common challenges in facilitating large events is timing: time is never our ally but always our governor. Any adverse actions impact discussion flow and decision making.
  - In-depth group discussion on complex topics takes time, regardless of how we want to 'speed chat', 'sound bite', or 'move the discussion along'.
  - Sometimes speakers take too long; service in the facility is slow or encumbered; or people arrive late, step out, or leave early.
  - The lead facilitator and the facilitation team need to know in advance where to shorten process without compromising outcomes, so that everyone can end on time.

- Contingency plans that are based on participant needs, program expectations, a robust and appropriate process, ethical principles and assumptions, and highly competent facilitators will endure even the most powerful and devastating external impacts.

- Examples of unexpected events that will effect process and timing include
  - facility emergencies like bomb threats, fire alarms, power outages, etc.; and
  - the actions of people like unexpected protests by vested interest groups.

Preparing the Team

16. The Facilitation Team

Achieving success in large events is the culmination of much work before, during and after the event. Mostly that success is achieved due to the efforts of all people involved in the event, including the facilitation team. If there is a magic to these events beyond the insights and 'aha's of the participants, it is in the firm, steady, competent and committed team of facilitators. They will say that the success and results achieved at the event is not theirs but rather belong to the client and the participants. Successful facilitation occurs when the participants, after it's all over say, "we did it ourselves".

- The facilitation team members must have impeccable skills and credentials. They must be experienced, skilled and knowledgeable in all of the principles and practices involved in public participation processes and in a broad range of facilitation methods.

- Every event is unique. The facilitation team must have a "fit" to the event.
    - Specific facilitation methods, skills, and experience depending on process and participants
    - Appropriate team size to the number of break out groups
    - Support needed to deliver the process, such as note takers and technical support

- The facilitation team members need to be:
    - fully familiar with the process as designed and
    - familiar with each other and other individuals they will be working with at the event.

- As they work, the facilitation team will:
    - focus on the results or outcomes as contracted with the client;
    - honour the wisdom, insights and 'right to be heard' of all participants; and
    - respect the process as designed, not allowing it to be replaced or compromised by special or self-serving interests.

- The attributes of members of a good facilitation team include:
    - excellent process facilitation skills,
    - good communication skills,
    - professional attitude,
    - firmness combined with tact and fairness,
    - some knowledge of the topic area,
    - neutrality to the product and content outcome,
    - loyalty to the process as well as to their team and the client,
    - transparency and genuineness when interacting with participants, and
    - a sense of humour.

17. The Assistant Lead Facilitator

The assistant lead facilitator (ALF) has a unique role and is necessary in events where there are large numbers of participants and break out groups. The ALF has often been a lead facilitator at other events. His/Her role is to function as a "lead facilitator" for a section of break out groups. With 100s to 1000s of participants in 7 to 75 breakout discussion groups, the lead facilitator for the event cannot possibly be available on call to everyone. His/Her ALF give him/her the extension needed to be everywhere at all times.

- The assistant lead facilitator must have an extensive set of skills and credentials.
  - Knowledgeable in all of the principles and practices involved in public participation processes and in a broad range of facilitation methods.

- The assistant lead facilitator is responsible for
  - ensuring that the small group facilitators have all they need to work at peak efficiency including IT support, room temperature control, furnishing and equipment set up, time reminders etc.;
  - providing effective emergency and ongoing communication between the lead facilitator and small group facilitators;
  - providing assistance to the small group facilitators to deal with any process or participant challenges that may arise;
  - providing periodic concrete feedback to the lead facilitator as the process unfolds;
  - (at the request of the lead facilitator) coordinating other aspects of the successful delivery of the event (client representatives, security, media, speakers, presenters, staff, etc.); and
  - standing in for a break out group facilitator who might become ill, or requires replacement at any time during the event.

- The assistant lead facilitator must also have
  - a clear understanding of accountabilities and lines of communication in order to support the lead facilitator,
  - (through the lead facilitator) a clear vision of a successful event,
  - a deep understanding of the process and intended outcomes so as to support small group facilitators on site during the event, and
  - a clear calendar at the start of, during and through the full closing of the event.

18. Orienting the Facilitation and Staff Team

Orienting your facilitation and staff team to the process and intended outcomes builds trust and esprit de corps amongst the team. As well, supporting everyone involved in physically and mentally ‘mapping the terrain’ builds needed confidence and commitment to the event.

- Before the event provide written material (in print or electronically) to the facilitation team including
  - event date, times and location;
  - expected number of participants;
  - an event process outline (including outcomes and decision making type);
  - facilitation and support team composition;
  - expected break out group size;
  - equipment requirements (what they should bring and what will be provided);
  - roles of all staff, clients, observers, and other attendees; and
  - date and agenda for an offsite in person or online orientation, usually sometime in the last 10 days prior to the event.

- Onsite at the event, prior to its commencement, another orientation should be undertaken. This orientation can take from two to six hours.
  - Welcome and introductions (of the client to the team and of the team to each other)
  - Orientation to the physical space
    - A written and verbal overview of facility maps, internet access, technology use and supports, emergency procedures and gathering spaces, etc.
    - A walking tour of the space being used for the event including plenary room, break out rooms, event office, refreshment and meal locations, media space, access stairwells and elevators, equipment storage, parking, emergency exits, first aid room, etc.
  - A detailed process overview
    - Distribution in writing of the final process as established by the lead facilitator and approved by the client
    - Clarity and commitment to the intended outcomes and the values and principles guiding the process during the event
    - Thorough discussion and agreement on the minute by minute process details
    - Discussion as to how changes, if any, will be made to the process during the event, usually only by the lead facilitator
    - Discussion and agreement on the importance of consistency and commitment to the process during the event
    - Sharing of tips and techniques by the team on how best to deliver the process, especially where necessary deep discussion might exert time pressure on the process

The importance of fully orienting the team in preparation for intensive group discussions must not be underestimated. Abbreviating or eliminating this discussion will be perilous to the result.

Delivering the Event

19. Pre-Event

Being on-site a day before the event starts is absolutely critical for the lead facilitator. Being on-site a half day or more before the event is scheduled to start is highly recommended for the facilitation team. This on-site presence is in addition to other previous site tours.

- It is important to know since any previous visits
  - if there have been any modifications or other changes to the facility space,
  - if there are any modifications or misunderstandings related to seating arrangements or furnishings set up in break out rooms
  - if there are any modifications or changes to audio visual or technical equipment requirements,
  - if there is a need to adjust or add space given increased participant registrations or cancellations,
  - if access to the facility has been changed or compromised by adjacent construction or public transit modifications, and/or
  - if there are any changes to logistics that involve the facilitators (i.e. their room assignments, their accommodation, meals, equipment, resources etc.)

- Once on site and before the event officially starts team members need time and space for at least three activities including
  - the on-site orientation with the lead facilitator (reference tip sheet #18 on page 21 of this booklet),
  - setting up their break out rooms including organizing equipment and supplies such as the availability and utility of wall space (for process materials), and
  - focusing their attention and thoughts to the event. (This brief person time allows facilitators to isolate all other non-event related thoughts and 'baggage' and prepare themselves for the process dynamics to follow.)

20. Opening the Event – In Plenary

The formal opening is the final opportunity to be clear on what the event is about, why it is being held, what participants are being asked to do, and how the results of this event may change the world in which the participants live. It is a time for clarification and release to go to work. It is the tipping point from planning to action, the first step into the event future. It is not enough to say that it is important to do it well, because the opening is one of those critical moments that can make or break an event.

- The client is responsible for leading the opening of the event. They should cover
  - the reason the event is being held,
  - the intended outcomes ,
  - why participants have been invited,
  - how the input from event participants will be used,
  - whether or not, and how the input created will be made available to participants,
  - how the client will communicate with participants about their input after everyone has gone home, and
  - the introduction of the lead facilitator and acknowledgement of the facilitation team.

- The Lead Facilitator is responsible for introducing the event process. S/he should:
  - provide an overview of the agenda with an emphasis on time lines;
  - acknowledge the facilitation team and break out group make up;
  - provide an overview of the working assumptions or ground rules around how group discussion and decision making is planned to occur;
  - indicate how/if groups will report back;
  - overview the roles of everyone present including participants, client, facilitators, politicians, media, observers (if any), recorders (if any) facility staff, and others;
  - introduce speakers or presenters;
  - offer to meet and guide any participants who are not certain of where they should be or what is expected of them to following the official opening and send off; and
  - at the conclusion of the plenary session formally send-off participants to break out group location.

21. Opening the Event – In Small Groups

One more small but critical step occurs when participants move from the plenary opening into break out (small group) discussions: the break out group's introduction to itself and its space. At the start most will not know each other – not the interest, position, or knowledge that each person has about the topic of discussion. This is the moment when strangers become connected to each other, the potential for moving from arm's length on the street to elbows bumping around a "kitchen table". In their immediate future, participants become less unknown and more familiar to each other. They may or may not have a strong emotional attachment to the topic, they may or may not agree or trust each other more, and they may have many different perspectives. But they all will leave the event different than when they arrived.

- The facilitator takes the first 20 to 30 minutes to cover several topics including
    - introductions,
    - agenda,
        - Note: the facilitator should review the timing and topics to be discussed and answer any questions from participants about the process.
    - guiding principles or ground rules,
        - Note: these principles or rules should be posted in the room as a visual reminder. The facilitator should review them verbally and seek agreement from the group to act in accordance with them.
    - context setting,
    - housekeeping and logistics, and
    - questions and concerns from participants.

- Introductions are very important and should cover
    - participant names,
    - home locations,
    - their connections to the event, and
    - brief comments about the topic.
        - Note: these comments are important and must be kept short. Facilitators must watch closely and respectfully curtail any long diatribes or positions intended to cut off or force future discussion and alternatives. The "right" answer must emerge after the discussions, not before they start.

- Housekeeping and logistics can include a variety of items relating to participant and group comfort and safety including but not limited to
    - location of restrooms,
    - leaving of personal materials during breaks or day's end, and
    - gathering place in case of emergency evacuation

- Once all of this has been covered, the facilitator asks for any questions or concerns and then asks participants if they are ready to proceed. This acknowledgement to proceed is the precise moment when the participants as a group should know they have moved from the impersonal to the personal and from abstract to specific. The opening is over, deeper discussion is about to begin.

22. During the Event

Once small group discussion starts the event is fully launched and the lead and assistant lead facilitators can do very little. Trusting the process, the small group facilitators, and the participants is a test of patience. Group discussions take on a life of their own.

- The lead facilitator and assistant lead facilitators (ALFs) can only circulate and watch. This is when participant engagement really happens.
  - Circulate and observe in as passive and unobtrusive a way as possible.

- Watching for various specific activities can tell the passive observer much about how the discussions are progressing. The lead and assistant lead facilitators focus on:
  - group progress through the agenda,
    - This tells them much about the time taken in discussions and where groups are in the discussion process. Usually this can be determined by observing any group recordings on flip charts or white boards or similar or by positioning themselves quietly at the back of a room and listening to the discussion.
  - difficult or challenging points of discussion, and
    - The group may be stalled despite the facilitator's best efforts. Sometimes with the lead or assistant lead facilitators standing quietly at the back of the room, the small group facilitator takes the opportunity to ask them for a suggestion or clarification on the stuck point. This provides an opportunity to suggest some means to break the log jam or bump the discussion along without prescribing content to the group. The content belongs to the group not the facilitators.
  - Opportunities, such as during discussion breaks, to meet with the facilitator.
    - This is an opportunity for the lead or assistant lead facilitators to offer suggestions or provide verbal support to the facilitator, especially where the group has bogged down and is running late on time. They can also take this time to coach, clarify and compliment.

- Small group discussions are sometimes smooth, sometimes chaotic. Always the ownership of the product of small group discussion is that of the group that created it. This is why public events with meaningful and respectful discussion hold such promise.

23. Closing the Event – In Small Groups

Similar to the opening of small group discussion, it is also important to formally end the small group discussion. The opening and closing are not trivial parts of group discussions; they are the book ends of the discussion. Like lifting the cover of a book, the opening signifies formal group entry into the discussion, while the closing signifies formal closing of the group discussion, the closing of the back cover of a book. After closing participants return to other parts of their lives; they leave the event and all that it entails.

- The facilitator assists the group in terminating their discussions by saving some time for two conversations.
  - First, a short discussion where the group identifies the key points that they wish make during any report back to plenary. Usually report backs are structured to be brief, summative to key discussion points, and intended to inform other participants and the client of those points deemed most important by the small groups during their discussions.
    - The short discussion about report backs contributes to focusing the group's thinking on important points from their perspective and sets up their thinking for the debrief that follows.
  - Second, a debrief of their work including
    - a summary of the results of their discussions (see above) and
    - a conversation about the process used in inviting and guiding the discussions.
  - Both discussions as outlined above should take no more than 20-30 minutes.
  - Once these two discussions are completed, thinking around the topic has been concluded. For small groups, it's over now.

- This time is also a moment of conclusion for individuals. During group discussions many individual insights and perspective shifts may have occurred. Thoughts and ideas not previously considered, known, or held dear can emerge or shift when presented through group discussions. Commitment to individual action is often sealed with small group discussion conclusion.

24. Closing the Event – In Plenary

Finally, the large event must be formally closed, starting with short small group report backs, moderated by the lead facilitator. This is followed by expressions of gratitude expressed by the lead facilitator and finally final remarks by the client representative are made. The closure is short, to the point, and, like the plenary opening, important to do well.

- Report backs are
  - succinct summations (five minutes maximum per group) of the final considered conclusions of small group discussions,
  - fully representative of what the small group wants reported back, and
  - done by a participant in the small group or by the group facilitator.
    - Who does the report back is decided by the lead facilitator in conjunction with the client in the design stage of the process. If they decide it is to be a member of the small group then the final decision will be that of the small group prior to their discussions ending.

- Expressions of gratitude are delivered in two parts.
  - The lead facilitator speaks first. These comments reflect
    - appreciation to the participants for their efforts and considerations during the event,
    - appreciation to the facilitators and other onsite staff for their efforts leading up to and during the event,
    - appreciation to the client for their initiative and commitment to hosting and delivering the event, and
    - a reminder to participants to complete any evaluation forms or other acknowledgements (e.g., to allow their name on participants lists to be distributed post event).
  - The client representative speaks second. These comments generally reflect
    - appreciation to the lead facilitator and facilitation team;
    - appreciation to other on site staff including facility staff;
    - appreciation to the participants for their efforts, commitment, and sacrifices of time and presence away from employment and family;
    - how the information will be used, how it will be distributed, next steps in the process for this topic, and what will be done because of their efforts; and
    - safe travels home and official event closure.

Closure

25. Closing the Event

Large events hold the promise of great benefits for public participation and input into laws, policies, and activities that affect people's lives. That promise is filled when such events are done well and when they are successful in meeting authentic participation values and results. Lives are changed individually most often in small steps, but collectively in great leaps. And client's enterprises are changed too. But in closing one event and moving on, what's important?

For the Facilitation Team

- Take time to debrief as a team.
  - The client finds the opportunity to privately say thanks at this time.
  - Facilitators take a brief moment to vent, express emotions, and release stress.
  - A conversation is led by the lead facilitator during which facilitators provide a spontaneous and fresh assessment of the process used, its strengths and weaknesses, and its effectiveness in achieving the desired outcomes.
  - There is also a brief time for celebration formal closure.
  - It's ideal for the debrief to occur on site, when the intensity of the event is still felt and spontaneous and intuitive thoughts are best expressed.

For the Client

- The client usually takes the time to attend the facilitation team debrief and experience the event through their eyes. This time is valuable for the client to expand perspective on the efforts given during the event.
- Often the client debrief is continued off site over a period of days or weeks between the client and his/her event planning team and includes the lead facilitator. This ongoing debrief is the prime vehicle for compiling the final event report and any next steps.

For the Lead Facilitator

- Following the event send a written thank you to all facilitators with appropriate copies to the primary client contact, respective managers, and anyone else deemed appropriate.
- In addition to the debrief activities with the facilitation team and the client, collect and compile the evaluation and content data (where it is agreed that the content data will be completed by the lead facilitator) on site if available or following event closure. This material becomes part of the client debrief.
- Review and clarify the data prior to handing it over to the client. This is usually completed within 10 days to two weeks and becomes part of the client debrief.
- Review the evaluations and share the feedback with others on the design team.
- Assess all debrief material and determine if the intended outcomes of the event were achieved. This assessment is also a part of the client debrief.

26. Evaluation

Beyond planning and delivering a large event, evaluating the outcomes is critical and must be completed. This is a cooperative effort by both the client and the lead facilitator. Evaluating the participant experience is also an important part of the assessment, both for process effectiveness in future events and for perspective shifts toward public participation practices.

- Evaluation can have two time elements: evaluation on site and evaluation post event.
  - Evaluation on site includes written and verbal feedback.
    - Paper evaluation forms are distributed with participants' event material or at some time prior to event closure. These written forms may also be distributed electronically following the event.
    - Facilitators use a structured conversation at the small group closure to obtain verbal feedback from participants.
    - These formats provide initial insights as to whether the intended outcomes, including the product and the participant experience, have been achieved.
  - Evaluation post event has multiple steps.
    - A formal written summary, usually a collation of all the written evaluations submitted by participants, is prepared. It is then presented and discussed at a post event meeting of the event planning and delivery team members.
    - Written evaluations are submitted by the lead facilitator and all other event planning and delivery team members. This is a different evaluation from than that of the participants.
    - The lead facilitator conducts a structured conversation with his/her facilitation team. Sample narrative questions that the lead facilitator might ask and record in summary include:
      - have participant evaluations been summarized clearly and without bias,
      - was the process effective in meeting event intended outcomes,
      - what factors if any prevented small groups from reaching a desired result, and
      - what have we learned.
    - Finally a verbal discussion of all of the above in a post event meeting is conducted. The results of that meeting discussion are then written into the final event report compiled by the client.