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“Facilitation Techniques to Make Working Groups Lively and Fun”

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We have all experienced effective working groups: ones where we feel engaged, where our ideas matter, where lots of people contribute, where we learn from our peers, and where we work together to make things happen.

Drawing on the fields of knowledge management, organizational development, and adult learning, this workshop highlights and applies some key principles that may be useful to keep in mind as you think about how CORE members participate in and contribute to working groups. These are:

- **Who is in the room?** People who attend CORE meetings typically bring a wealth of experiences, capabilities, and ideas. Does the working group meeting taking full advantage of what participants bring, or do we think of them as empty vessels that we are going simply pour information into? How can the meeting leverage the collective knowledge of everyone in the room?
- **Why are we here?** Think through your objectives for the meeting and what are the needs of participants. What is in it for them? Receiving information passively is a low-level need and not one that best uses high-value face time. Think of face-to-face meeting time as a scarce and precious resource that should only be used for purposes that can't be better accomplished another way. Meetings that provide opportunities for creating new insights and knowledge, that get people talking and exchanging ideas, and that engage people in problem-solving tend to be more highly valued than meetings where participants are mainly just listening. Working group meetings can better achieve such engagement and learning goals if they are purposefully designed to do so.
- **People learn by talking; the more participants can discuss, debate, and analyze ideas by talking about them, the more they learn.** Listening does provide us with new ideas, but as long as those ideas are just swimming silently around in our heads, they are neither fully formed nor actionable. It is only when we put an idea together in a way that allows us explain the idea to others, that the idea takes shape for us as well as for those we are talking with. For this reason, new knowledge and insights are best created in small group conversation. A small group of 3-5 members is the size that produces the richest and most in-depth thinking. It is large enough to contain diverse views yet small enough for members to engage each other. Engaging each other means asking questions to clarify the meaning another has expressed and challenging as well as building on others' ideas.
- **After small groups have been in conversation, their ideas need to be brought together in a large group setting to integrate their insights into the thinking of the whole.** In a lengthy meeting, small and large group discussions can be alternated to stimulate knowledge creation and synthesis. How can the meeting be designed to make this happen—to go efficiently between small and large groups, to integrate and synthesize ideas? Instead of lengthy group report-outs, which can be tedious, try giving a few volunteers the chance to respond to a question like “What did you learn in your small group that is important for the whole group to understand?” Gallery walk are another way to share insights with the whole group.
- **People are more likely to share insights and reflections when they have already established a connection.** Give people a chance to get connected to each other before they try to construct new ideas together. Use introductions, social activities, information provided before the meeting, or ice-breakers that allow participants to talk informally to get a sense of each other. Icebreakers that allow participants to frame themselves in a way that shows what knowledge and experience they can offer

the group are a good way to establish connections. For example, when asking people at round tables to introduce themselves, ask them to say their name, organization, and then something substantive, like “tell us one best practice that you’ve found to be effective in your work” or something related to the topic of discussion. It is these examples that others in the room are more likely to remember and associate with that individual. Conversely, icebreakers that don’t relate to anything of interest to people may seem forced or even awkward.

- **What will happen that will make the best use of everyone’s time?** How do you want people to interact during the meeting? Is there value in having people connect with others who don’t happen to be sitting at the table they chose when they walked in the room? At what point in the activity would it be helpful to bring together people of different experiences? Who should come together and when? And how will ideas generated in small groups come back to the whole room? Having a plan for the meeting which describes and indicates times for each activity and gives directions to all those facilitating helps to make the best use of scarce meeting time. It’s a good practice to check the planned times with a colleague to make sure they are realistic.
- **How the room is set up makes a difference.** Classroom style set-up suggests passive listening. Small groups (4-6 people) are more conducive to deep conversation than 10 or 11 people crowded around a large round table. If possible, remove tables and just use chairs. Use of chairs without tables makes it easier to re-arrange participants in different size groups and to do whole-room activities like “voting with your feet” or gallery walks. Tables can also be too conducive for participants to bring out their laptops and multi-task.
- **Build in time for reflection.** Before beginning a discussion or conversation, ask each participant to think silently for a minute about the question or topic under discussion. Giving just a small amount of time for individual reflection increases the quality of each person’s contribution, since it allows each person to organize their ideas and connect new information with their own experience.

We have also found there are many simple techniques for organizing group interactions that encourage wider engagement and participation. Some are **connecting** practices that bring together people with the “know-how,” providing them with opportunities to learn from one another, share experiences, and generate new ideas about their work. Others are **collecting** practices—methods of capturing information, although often this occurs as a result of new insights gained through **connecting** practices.

Some of the techniques that we think are especially relevant to CORE working groups are listed below. Additional techniques and tips are provided in the other handouts for this workshop, including *Designing Participatory Meetings and Brownbags: A TOPS Quick Guide to Linking Development Practitioners* and *Tips for Making Virtual Meetings Effective* by Nancy Dixon. The guide *Engaging Everyone with Liberating Structures* by Group Jazz is also an excellent resource, available at:

<http://www.groupjazz.com/documents/EngagingEveryone.pdf>.

Technique	How to apply in working group meetings
<p>1-2-4-ALL is a technique from the guide <i>Engaging Everyone with Liberating Structures</i> that facilitates rich conversation in small groups and then brings the small groups together to integrate their ideas around an important question or issue. Give participants a short amount of time to silently reflect on a question or issue (1). Then ask participants to find one other person and share their ideas. You can invite them to talk to the person next to them or, if you’d like them to move around and mix it up a bit more, ask them to stand up and find a partner (2). Give the pairs 5-10 minutes to discuss the question. Then ask two pairs to join up (4). Suggest that they each first share interesting things they heard or</p>	<p>1-2-4-All can be used to generate, discuss, or reflect on questions of interest to the working group, including develop action agendas. The technique gets</p>

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<p>said in the previous rounds. Then continue with the conversation as a group. Less time is needed in the pairing of pairs. Then invite everyone back to the whole group (All). Without “calling on” individual small groups, ask an open question such as “What insights emerged from your conversation?” or “What did you learn that is important for the large group to understand?”. The technique can also be done as 1-3-6-All, using trios rather than pairs. <i>Read more: https://www.usaidassist.org/resources/1-2-4-all</i></p>	<p>everyone in the room engaged in the conversation and produces a natural synthesis of the ideas as pairs or trios join and integrate their ideas.</p>
<p>25-to-10 (Crowd Sourcing) is a technique from the guide <i>Engaging Everyone with Liberating Structures</i> for quickly generating and rating ideas. Distribute one index card to every participant. Pose a question, and ask everyone to think about their best response/idea silently, and then write it clearly on the card. When all have completed their card, ask everyone to mill around swapping cards repeatedly until the cards have churned and no one has their own card. At the signal, ask participants to pair off. Each person reads the idea on the card in their hand and tries to sell the idea to the other person. Then trade cards and rate the idea on the card on a scale of 1-5: “5” being fabulous and “1” just OK. At the signal, each person makes a new pair and repeats the procedure. Repeat five times. At round 5, each card should have 5 ratings. Each person adds up the score for the card in their hand. The facilitator asks for any idea with a score of 25...24...23...etc. until the highest scored idea is identified. Ask the person to read the highly rated idea aloud. Continue to identify and read out the top 10 high scores. If the group is small, each card can be used to express more than one idea.</p>	<p>This is a great method to generate ideas and get the sense of the entire group about them, allowing for ideas to be rank-ordered.</p>
<p>Card Sorting is a way of gathering and organizing ideas that draws on the knowledge of the whole group. Similar to 25-to-10, each participant reflects on a question and writes one idea on a card or post-it (you can allow people to generate more than one card). It is helpful to have a sticky wall on which cards can be posted and reposted, or butcher paper if post-its are used. After all the ideas have been generated and posted, ask all to look at the posted ideas and begin sorting them into like groups, such as ideas that can be easily implemented together. Encourage participants to add names for the groups or categories. Once ideas have been sorted into like groups, ideas can be rank ordered by giving each participant an equal number of colored dots to vote on the ideas (e.g., a participant can place 1 dot on each of 10 ideas, or weights their vote by placing more than 1 dot on an idea they feel strongly about).</p>	<p>Card sorting and voting is a fast way to generate written ideas and engage the whole group in categorizing and ranking them.</p>
<p>Field Trip Around the Room is a technique that can be used in a meeting to organize how members of the group discuss several topics and integrate their ideas for how to address them. It uses small group conversation and successive discussions of the same topic by different groups to help to integrate the ideas of the whole group around specific topics/questions posted on flip charts in the</p>	<p>This technique is a good alternative to plenary discussion when you have several issues that</p>

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<p>corners of the room. To organize the field trip, divide the participants into groups—one group for each issue to be discussed (ideally, 5-8 people per group). (A quick way to divide participants into groups is to have them count off in sequence—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.—and join the group of the number they said.) Have each group stand by one of the flip charts, and when instructed to do so, discusses the topic/question and writes their answers on the flipchart in a 10-minute round. Each group has the opportunity to address the issues on each chart sequentially in 10-minute intervals before moving on to the next chart. Each group leaves one person behind to explain what their group has just put on the chart – that person has 1 minute to explain before moving on to rejoin his or her group. After every group has worked on every flip chart, have the groups return to the flip chart they started at. Give each group a few minutes to study the comments left by all groups and then give a short report-out of the key ideas noted on the chart and suggest next steps to follow up on these ideas.</p> <p><i>Read more:</i> https://www.usaidassist.org/resources/field-trip-around-room</p>	<p>specific groups need to discuss. Similar in concept to a knowledge café but faster and engages the participants in creating the synthesis notes.</p>
<p>Gallery Walk (aka Walk-About) is a technique from the guide <i>Engaging Everyone with Liberating Structures</i> that gets the whole room on its feet to take a walking tour of posters or flip chart pages generated by different groups that reflect each group’s answers to a question or series of questions. All the charts are posted around the room, and the whole group walks around to look at them one at a time. A member of the group can be asked to share one or two highlights, or the meeting facilitator can make comments on each chart, but most of the information is conveyed as participants read each chart. After the gallery walk, ask for reflections on what people saw with an open, inviting question, such as “What stood out for you?”</p>	<p>This is an energizing way to organize small group report-outs because it gets everyone on their feet and moving around the room.</p>
<p>A Knowledge Café is a method for hosting conversations about questions that foster discussion about topics important to participants. These conversations link and build on each other as people move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas, and discover new insights into the questions or issues. The Café host asks the meeting participants to sit as groups of five to six people at small tables covered in paper to allow for participants to write on the table cover. Each table has a clearly identified question (e.g., written on a table tent). In Round 1, participants discuss the “table question” for 20 to 30 minutes and make notes on the table paper. The table host uses a notebook to summarize the discussion as it continues. When the café facilitator gives the signal, everyone except the table host moves to another table of their choice. Ideally, the members of the table should try to choose different tables so that they do not move from table to table as a group. In subsequent rounds, the table host welcomes the new guests and briefly shares the main ideas, themes and questions of the initial conversation to encourage new table guests to link and connect ideas coming from their previous table conversations. By providing opportunities for people to move in several rounds of conversation, ideas, questions, and themes begin to link and</p>	<p>When a technical team has a large event with multiple stakeholders or staff from field offices present, a Knowledge Café can be organized in order to engage all participants in conversation around a set of pre-determined questions. The design also encourages discussion among different groups,</p>

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<p>connect. At the end of the three rounds, all of the tables or conversation clusters in the room will be cross-pollinated with insights from prior conversations.</p> <p><i>Read more:</i> https://www.usaidassist.org/resources/knowledge-café</p>	<p>since participants move independently among tables to discuss questions that interest them.</p>
<p>Popcorn Report-outs is a technique for eliciting comments from those who feel moved to share them, rather than calling on tables or groups sequentially to report out. Ask the open question, “What did you hear in your small group that is important for the whole group to understand?” and allow the group to think for 20-30 second before you say anything further. Some people will be moved to shared (like the first kernels of popping popcorn), and hearing from a few people will likely encourage others to also share reflections. The facilitator can also ask a question such as, “Did anyone have a different view?” to elicit other views. Hearing from 5-8 individuals in a large group can create a sense of the key issues discussed across the small groups and takes less time and usually involves less repetition than group-by-group report-outs.</p>	<p>Use to bring the ideas of small group discussions back to the whole or to get a sense of how participants reacted to a presentation.</p>
<p>Speed Consulting is a group technique that draws on the experience of participants to advise another participant on how to address a specific problem or issue. It uses small group conversation and a fast-paced schedule to focus participants on providing concrete, actionable advice. In advance, identify a number of people (around 10% of the total) with a program implementation issue which they would like help with – they are to play the role of the client who will be visited by a team of brilliant management consultants. Implementation issues should not be highly complex; ideally, each issue could be described in three minutes or less. Sit one issue owner at each table. Everybody else at the table plays the role of the high-priced consultant—paid by the minute! The issue owner remains at the table throughout the exercise, while the groups of “visiting consultants” move around. 15 minutes per round is usually enough time for the consultants to dispense valuable advice based on their own experience. The time pressure is designed to prevent any one person monopolizing the time with long-winded explanations. Can be done with 1-3 rounds, depending on how much time is available. As the end of the exercise, ask the issue owners to comment on the input they received, and then ask the consultants to do the same. Typically, both groups of participants will voice surprise at the breadth and value of ideas that they heard.</p> <p><i>Read more:</i> https://www.usaidassist.org/resources/speed-consulting</p>	<p>This is an engaging way to build in peer problem solving into any meeting.</p>
<p>Speed Networking is a technique from the guide <i>Engaging Everyone with Liberating Structures</i> for getting all participants in a meeting to reflect on a question and share their insights with others in small group conversation. Invite everyone to think individually about a provocative question that relates to the purpose of the meeting or the group. Make it a question that levels the playing</p>	<p>Speed networking is a great way to generate energy at the beginning of a meeting by</p>

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<p>field and for which there is no “right” answer—something that everyone in the group has an equal ability to talk about. Tell participants that when they hear the bell, they should find a partner. Explain that partnering with a person they know less well than they know others will be most interesting. Invite the pairs to have a conversation about the suggested question. After a short time (5-10 minutes depending on how much total time you have), ring a bell or use some signal to let participants know it is time to find another partner and have another conversation. Ask participants to raise their hand if they are looking for a partner so everyone can see who else needs a partner. Three “rounds” are usually sufficient to allow for a lot of mixing and conversation. Tell participants that when the bell rings continuously, they should stop their conversation and come back to the large group. Have a short large group conversation about what the participants experienced in the exercise.</p>	<p>providing an opportunity for everyone to speak early on.</p>
<p>Storytelling is a way to share knowledge that incorporates the context, emotion and tacit knowledge. The story conveys much more than a series of basic procedural steps. It can contain the rationale, the strategy and the cultural values implicit within the actions taken by the story teller. It is invaluable to put messages in a context that learners can better understand through key details. One way to use story-telling in a large group is to have people gather in small groups of three to five. In each small group, each member has two minutes to tell a story centered on a question provided by the facilitator. Use a bell or other signal to let all groups know when it’s time to begin and when it’s time to go on to the next story. After two minutes, the next person begins their story. Once each person in the small group has told their two-minute story, everyone is asked to get up and find a new small group of three to five people that have not yet heard their story. Repeat the process of each person sharing a two-minute story in groups of three to five people. Continue until each person has had the chance to tell their story three or four times and has heard 12-16 stories. Then bring everyone back into the large group. One way to process what people heard in the stories is for the facilitator to ask people to share what they learned from the stories they heard and from the act of telling them. What new methods have they heard about? What insights have they gained into the problem being discussed? What do they want to know more about?</p> <p><i>Read more:</i> https://www.usaidassist.org/resources/storytelling</p>	<p>Use storytelling as an alternative to formal presentations or as a way of sharing successes or challenges. Because stories naturally have an emotional content (how the person felt about the situation described), the storyteller seems more approachable. Members who listen to another member tell a story are more willing to give that person a follow-up call or email to learn more detail about what happened.</p>
<p>TRIZ is a technique from the guide <i>Engaging Everyone with Liberating Structures</i> that can help a group think creatively about how to solve a problem or improve a complex process by thinking about the opposite of the desired result. TRIZ encourages participants to think outside the usual solutions by envisioning what would be the perfect system to prevent the desired result from occurring. By focusing on how to ensure that the opposite occurs, characteristics that may be preventing the desired result from happening are more easily identified and</p>	<p>TRIZ brings a game-like quality to the identification of barriers to achieving our desired results. As a structured</p>

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<p>can then be addressed. Groups generate a list of the key elements of the perfect system to prevent the desired result from occurring and then compare that list to the current situation to identify what aspects of the system are actually in place now. For each element of the “perfect system to prevent the desired outcome” that is similar to the current situation, identify what it would take to eliminate the similarities. Use these insights to design specific changes to make in the current process/system.</p> <p><i>Read more: https://www.usaidassist.org/resources/triz</i></p>	<p>creativity exercise, TRIZ works best in a small group (5-8 participants), but can be used in larger groups by applying the technique in several small groups working in parallel and then bringing pairs or trios of groups together to share and integrate their insights.</p>
<p>Virtual Meetings help a community or a team stay connected between face-to-face opportunities. However, they often they fail to hold the attention of attendees – so too often people listen with “half an ear” and busy themselves with email while on the call. With a great deal of planning (it takes three times more time for planning than for being on the call) for before, during and after, calls can become successful knowledge sharing experiences by keeping participants active and focused during the call. Critical factors are 1) the number of people on the call, 2) the kinds of questions that are asked and 3) techniques for getting a response from attendees. It’s important to engage participants through pre-work as well as maintain a sense of momentum between calls.</p> <p><i>Read more: See handout “Tips for Making Virtual Meetings Effective” by Nancy Dixon</i></p>	<p>Virtual meetings can be used to keep members of an interest group or community of practice connected and share learning and experience around a particular topic.</p>
<p>Voting with Your Feet (aka Agree/Disagree) is a technique for engaging participants in expressing their views for or against a position by moving to one side of the room or the other. The facilitator can ask for volunteers to explain their position at each vote, for and against. If done with several questions in succession, it creates a lively milling of the group as participants move back and forth between the positions.</p> <p><i>Read more in the TOPS Quick Guide “Designing Participatory Meeting and Brownbags”</i></p>	<p>This is a quick and lively way to get the sense of the group on an important question.</p>