

IHRFG CONFERENCE SESSIONS: Tips for Organizers

Please pay careful attention to the following points as you help your facilitator and presenters prepare for your session:

Focus On the Relevance to Grantmakers: Everyone in the room will be a grantmaker. Please work with your moderator and presenters in advance to think through how this session and discussion is most relevant to grantmakers. Many funders in the room are eager to walk out with concrete options for next steps. What are the implications for funders of this information? In your and your panelists' experience, what specific funding strategies are most effective? Least effective? What are some fundable solutions? What do you recommend prioritizing? (Naturally, this is not to be confused with making a plug for a specific organization.) Designate time within your session – perhaps meeting in small groups – for participants to strategize grantmaking responses, strategies and/or implications and generate related questions to share with each other and the experts in the room.

Draw Out Divergent Points of View: IHRFG members gain particular insight from respectful debate during meetings. This has implications for who is invited to speak in your session and implications for how the session is facilitated. IHRFG members benefit from a clear, straightforward articulation of multiple thoughtful perspectives. It is critical that moderators/facilitators draw this out! It is critical to alert your panelists in advance that candidness – not polite agreement – is most important. We are not interested in lackluster “group think” or adherence to a perceived acceptable human rights perspective. Rather, IHRFG values robust discussion, including perspectives on situations that suggest that a human rights approach or framework might not be the most effective.

We Want Discussion: Overestimate your allotment of time for discussion. One of the most common mistakes is sessions that end up “talking at” the audience for an hour-and-a-half. Presentations should be short, leaving plenty of time to bring out more information in discussion. Facilitators should recognize the difference between a “discussion” session and “question and answer” session, and seek to drive discussion. TRUST that the information that this audience wants to know will come out through questions and discussion with them. *Under no circumstances should facilitators let anyone speak for more than 10 minutes.*

Avoid “Bait and Switch”: Remember that sessions should follow the description and title posted. Our participants often leave sessions that seem off-topic or not as advertised. If your session content evolves in the continued planning process, your title and description should evolve, too.

We Love Facilitators Who “Facilitate”: See below, *“Collected Wisdom for Facilitators.”*

SUCCESSFUL SESSIONS ARE:

1. Clear and concise

- Preface presentations or responses with an outline of what you will cover
- Remember your international, multi-lingual audience: Speak slowly and with limited idiomatic expressions, local slang, and references to (American) popular culture

- Remember your audience has varying levels of understanding about the issue you're presenting: Define – or just avoid – jargon, explain historical references, and spell out abbreviations and acronyms
- Use PowerPoint presentations very sparingly and strategically, and avoid text-heavy slide at all costs
- Stay focused on the topic at hand or the question posed to you, and the objectives of the session (avoid digressions and meandering)

2. Dynamic and engaging

- Open the session with an energetic, captivating, and/or provoking beginning, one that inspires interest and draws attention
- Employ interactive formats and activities (*see attached, "Some Format Examples of Learning Activities"*) that promote discussion with the audience and draw out divergent points of view
- Use multi-media (film clips, recorded testimonies from the field, photos/images, cartoons, etc.) when and where it adds value
- Maintain a lively, energetic speaking style

3. Practical and concrete, down to the nitty-gritty level (*see above, "Focus on the Relevance to Grantmakers"*)

- Spend less time on the problems, and more on the solutions that grantmakers can support
- Mention not only *what* funders can do to solve/resolve the challenges, but also *how*, right down to the specifics (e.g. we hired a consultant who had X,Y,Z experience; we added a line in our grant applications about inclusion of people with disabilities; we asked our board members to complete a survey; etc.)
- Be courageous and share lessons learned from failures and mistakes, and how you adapted or addressed the failure/mistake.

COLLECTED WISDOM FOR FACILITATORS¹

The word "facilitate" does not mean to lead, control, or direct. Facilitate simply means to make easier. Facilitators make meetings run *smoothly*. Facilitators:

- Help guide the group through the meeting structure and process.
- Keep the group focused on the agenda.
- Regulate the flow of discussion.
- Clarify and summarize points, test for consensus and formalize decisions.
- Help the group manage conflicts.

The secrets to successful facilitation

Facilitators can use their own meeting experiences to observe other facilitators, learn from mistakes and borrow from successful facilitation. Listed below are several secrets to successful facilitation:

- Be sure to start and end on time.
- Keep the conversation flowing and summarize often. If people seem to be saying the same thing in different ways, try to summarize and move forward.
- Encourage participation from as many attendees as possible. Draw out quiet people, limit over-talking, and do not let anyone dominate the discussion. Furthermore, do not allow people with race, class, gender, or other subtle or non-subtle privilege to dominate.
- Use appropriate facilitation tools to get the most out of the voices in the room. Use a go-around to make everyone heard, small breakout groups to generate lots of ideas quickly, or brainstorming to start things off.
- Tune into the overall feeling of the group throughout the session - check energy levels, whether session objectives are being fulfilled, etc.
- Sum up and provide some satisfying closure to the meeting – ideally summarizing the group's most salient points and any follow-up work.

Important qualities and skills of a strong facilitator include:

- Understanding of the goals of the session.
- Reasonably knowledgeable of the topic explored.
- Listening well and asking strategic questions to clarify viewpoints, including seeking substantiation of generalizations.
- Generating interesting, interactive discussion.
- Being assertive, but not overbearing; intervening decisively and providing direction when a speaker or participant goes on too long or dominates.
- Demonstrating little emotional investment in, or a strong opinion on, a particular perspective on the issues discussed.
- Readiness to draw out exploration of grantmaking strategies early and throughout the session.
- Openness and adaptable to creative, unconventional session formats.

¹ Adapted from "[Guide to Running Fun and Effective Meetings](#)," Student Environmental Action Coalition and Seeds for Change, "[Facilitation of Meetings](#)."

SOME FORMAT EXAMPLES OF LEARNING ACTIVITIES²

Debate (also known as “Point/Counter Point”)

These sessions feature opposing points of view, with protagonists and antagonists taking opposite sides of a specific topic. A moderator facilitates a lively debate. [View an example](#) and review [IHRFG’s Debate Format guidelines](#).

Mock Trial

A topic or question is re-crafted as a “charge” and the guilt or innocence (or pros and cons) of the charge are examined through a prosecutor, defense attorney, witnesses, judge, and jury. Review [IHRFG’s Mock Trial guidelines](#).

Interview

Instead of formal presentations, the moderator poses specific questions to each speaker to elicit the intended information. The discussion can be scripted or free-flowing.

Ignite

Participants have five minutes to speak about their ideas using 20 slides. Each slide is displayed for 15 seconds and automatically advanced. The presentations are meant to “ignite” the audience on a subject; that is, generate awareness and stimulate thought and action. See some examples [here](#).

Role-Playing

These sessions are organized around short skits that illustrate a point. Role play can help participants understand different viewpoints and practice strategies in conversation and conflict management.

Strategy Session / Problem-Solving / Real-Time Consulting

The moderator or presenter poses a group of questions and then breaks the audience into small groups to answer a specific question or solve a particular problem. Groups then report back.

Share-and-Shift Method

This format allows for simultaneous exchanges on more than one topic in several rounds. Each table or room pertains to one topic and includes one or two facilitators/presenters. Participants meet simultaneously in one round for a set period of time, then rotate to the next table or room.

Panel Discussion

No more than three speakers, led by a moderator, address a group. This format generally consists of 25 minutes for speaker comments and moderator questions, and 25 minutes for questions from the audience. For most conference participants, this is the least engaging method of learning.

Socratic Method, including polling/voting

The moderator poses a series of questions to the audience to elicit information and opinions, and/or to collect votes.

² Attribution: The Council on Foundations