

TOP TEN TIPS FOR FACILITATORS

As a facilitator, your role is to create a safe space, encouraging people to share their experiences and insights in respectful and productive ways.

Prepare to remain neutral:

1. **Separate the role of facilitator from teacher.** A teacher has a pre-set agenda (e.g., to dispel stereotypes around the hijab or to explain why a Muslim worker takes breaks to pray). Effective teachers participate fully in discussions and are clear about their own perspectives. In contrast, a facilitator's job is to guide a group's dialogue without comment or taking sides. It is very difficult to serve as teacher and not to be seen by participants as favoring a particular side or point of view.
2. **Consider working with a co-facilitator** that represents a different group or point of view, especially if you represent a religious group that is part of the dialogue.
3. **Know your "hot button" issues before you start.** Substantive discussions can trigger intense feelings for you as well as for participants. In the current climate, religion intersects with volatile political issues, further increasing the potential for powerful emotions to surface. As a facilitator, you may end up being a target or lightning rod for those feelings, so give yourself some time to reflect on the issues in the films before your event. Before your event, plan how you will respond to comments that may offend without shutting down dialogue or escalating a discussion into an argument.
4. **Know the facts.** You need not be an expert on Islam to facilitate a discussion, but the more you know, the more effective you will be at helping the group move quickly past simple misconceptions to deeper issues. To help you prepare, this site includes basic information on Islam. To get a sense of the diversity of opinion within the Muslim community, view the films and check several of the websites listed in the Resources section of the facilitator's guide.
5. **Set ground rules.** You might involve group members in this process by asking people what rules would help them feel safe enough to participate openly. In general, you will need two categories of rules. The first category provides the framework for discussion. It includes strategies for how people will take turns or indicate that they want to speak, and how you will prevent one or two people from dominating the discussion. The second category governs what people say. Some of these rules will be general, e.g., no one may interrupt someone who is speaking; no one may use a "put down" or "slur"; people may speak for themselves ("I think...") but may not generalize for others ("everyone agrees that..."), etc.

6. **Additional rules will apply specifically to discussions about religion.** For example, you'll want to make the room a "no proselytizing zone." In order not to offend those who believe they have a religious duty to convert non-believers, be clear that you are not judging the practice, but that the dialogue is likely to be more productive if the space remains neutral, so you are requesting a time out from the practice (much as candidates are not allowed to campaign at polling places).
7. **Encourage participants to listen with an ear towards understanding rather than judging.** Some people are so devoted to their religion that they have trouble hearing anything positive about another's beliefs without hearing it as a threat to their own faith. So remind participants that the event is not about deciding whether or not they like or agree with a particular religion. Rather, ask people to consider what they might learn or what insights they might gain about the adherents of another religion.
8. **Talk about the difference between "dialogue" and "debate."** In a debate, participants try to convince others that they are right. In a dialogue, participants try to understand each other and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening to each other actively.
9. Consider focusing on **common ground issues** first. Belief in freedom of religion might provide a useful starting point.
10. **And last, but not least, remind people that the purpose of this meeting is not to convince others of your point of view, but to help enrich and broaden each other's horizons by learning a little more about each other.**