CHAPTER 3

Verbal Techniques: What to Say

What a facilitator says can be thought of as verbal techniques or verbal skills—one of the most basic and simplest sets of skills facilitators use. Skilled facilitators apply a variety of verbal techniques to facilitate discussions, bring groups to consensus, and help groups manage through confusion and conflict. What a facilitator says influences the group in many ways. The skilled facilitator's comments, questions, summaries, feedback to the group, explanations, directions, and suggestions blend together to guide and help a group be productive.

Verbal skills range from asking questions to encourage group participation to summarizing to help a group understand its own complex inputs. As a facilitator, you must be keenly aware of a variety of verbal techniques and use them appropriately to achieve a balance of participation and to steer a group toward productive solutions and decisions. With practice, these techniques become easier and more natural, but as a new facilitator you may have to plan consciously to put techniques into action.

The verbal techniques listed here are some of the most important. They will be described in detail later in this chapter.

- Asking questions
- Probing
- Paraphrasing
- Redirecting questions and comments
- Referencing back
- Giving positive reinforcement
- Including quieter members
- Encouraging divergent views
- Shifting perspective
- Summarizing
- Bridging

Asking Questions

Perhaps the most basic facilitator skill is asking well-timed, appropriate questions to focus and steer a group through a particular process, such as brainstorming, prioritizing, evaluating, or coming to a decision. A skilled facilitator uses two basic types of questions when working with a group: open-ended and closed-ended.

Open-ended questions cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no," nor can they be answered by supplying a fact. Open-ended questions encourage participants to supply ideas, opinions, reactions, or information. Use open-ended questions when you want people to think and participate, especially to generate a lot of ideas or data. An open-ended question can be very effective to explore a subject more deeply or to help group members be more honest with one another.

Open-ended questions usually begin with "What," "How," "Who," or "Why." Some examples are:

- "What is your reaction to that?"
- "How can this process be improved?"
- "What alternatives do we have?"
- "What suggestions do you have for . . . ?"
- "Why do you think there has been such a downturn in sales?"
- "How does that relate to our goal of . . . ?"
- "What do others in the group think?"

Open-ended questions start a group thinking, but closed-ended questions are used to find facts or guide the group toward closure. A closed-ended question is directive, calling for a "yes," a "no," or a fact. Closed or fact-finding questions are used to move on to the next step in the process, to wrap up a discussion, to obtain more specific information, or to direct group members to reach consensus. Here are some examples of closed questions:

- "Do you all agree, then, that this is the best choice?"
- "Have we covered everything?"
- "Are you ready to move on?"
- "Is everyone willing to support this decision 100 percent?"
- "Is this a realistic objective for today's meeting?"
- "Do we need Tom to be here for this decision?"
- "Can everyone stay another half hour to finish this discussion?"

Use caution when using closed-ended questions for several reasons: (1) Too many closed-ended questions may stifle or frustrate the group; (2) closed-ended questions, if not worded carefully, can put the group on the defensive, or create a negative atmosphere; and (3) a facilitator who uses too many closed-ended questions may actually steer the group in the direction he or she wants it to go (or so it may appear to group members).

Use closed-ended questions selectively. See Figure 3.1 for a summary of their use.

When working with a group to come to consensus, use a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions. Open-ended questions are needed to start the group thinking and generate a quantity of ideas. Closed

Figure 3.1. When to Use Closed-Ended Questions

When to Use	When to Avoid
To check for understanding: "Does everyone understand the process we will be using?"	To encourage brainstorming and creativity: "Do you have any ideas for alleviating this problem?" (Ask an open-ended question instead: "What ideas can you think of to alleviate this problem?")
To find out specific process information: "How much time do you think you will need to complete this step?"	To draw everyone out: "Does anyone have anything to add to that?" (Ask an open-ended question instead: "What do others think about that?")
To check for agreement: "Does everyone agree that these are the top three priorities?"	To intervene in a closed group: "Is everyone being open about this issue?" (Ask an open-ended question instead: "What thoughts and opinions are people holding back?")
To encourage expression of different viewpoints: "Does anyone have a different opinion?"	To foster openness and trust: "Is everyone willing to keep this confidential?" (Ask an open-ended question instead: "How do you suggest we deal with the issue of confidentiality?")
To check out the group's needs: "People seem a little tired. Do we need to take a break now?"	To encourage quieter or reluctant members: "Ellen, do you have something to say to that?" (Ask an open-ended question instead: "Ellen, how do you feel about that?")
To obtain buy-in on meeting objectives: "Are these realistic objectives for today's meeting?"	To probe for more information: "Is more detail needed?" (Ask an open-ended question instead: "What more can you tell us about that?")

questions are needed to evaluate and narrow down the ideas to a workable number. Here are some examples of how to use open and closed questions in a discussion to reach consensus:

To Generate Ideas

"What goals are we trying to accomplish?" (open-ended)

(List goals the group comes up with.)

To Narrow Down a List

"Which goal should we try to accomplish at this meeting?" (closed-ended)

"Does everyone agree that this is the right goal for today's meeting?" (closed-ended)

To Move to the Next Step

"Your goal, then, is to identify the top two problems you wish to focus on over the next few months. What problems are you facing?" (open-ended)

(List problems the group comes up with.)

To Evaluate a List of Items

"We've listed fourteen problems. Let's take some time to look at them. What do you notice about these problems?" (open-ended)

(Record input as the group discusses characteristics of the problems. Summarize the input and steer the group to the next task.)

"Are you ready, then, to try to narrow down these problems to the top two?" (closed-ended)

Continue this process, using group prioritization methods (discussed in Chapter 9, Ranking and Evaluating Material), to help the group reach its

goal for the meeting. Each step of the way, use open-ended and closed-ended questions to navigate the group through its dilemmas to a consensus decision. Generally speaking, skilled facilitators use more open than closed questions, probing the group so that it delves to the heart of issues and problems. However, one of the most important questions to ask is a closed question, when you think the group is reaching consensus: "Is everyone in agreement, then, that this is the best decision?" Another important closed question checks out the commitment of the group to the decision: "Will everyone agree, then, to support this decision 100 percent?"

People in today's fast-paced, results-oriented organizations are generally pressed for time and become adept at using closed questions to obtain information and data quickly. Unfortunately, many people lack the skill of knowing when and how to use open-ended questions and frequently run into trouble by asking only closed questions. Often, only the open questions lead to valuable information. Open questions allow more time for subpoints and auxiliary issues to surface that affect the quality of the data or information received. For example, in a one-on-one discussion, the speaker may ask a closed question such as, "Will that shipment for customer WBBT be ready on time?" A "yes" answer will satisfy the speaker, but important information may not have been shared. Had the speaker asked a more open question such as, "How is the shipment for customer WBBT coming along?" he or she might have heard more information such as, "It's going to be ready on time, but the shipping department is really shorthanded this week and is running behind. I doubt that customer WBBT will receive the shipment on time." Frequently, in their hurry to receive data, people will ask not only a closed question, but the *wrong* closed question. In the example above, the speaker really needed to ask the closed question, "Will customer WBBT receive the shipment on time?" Even if you pose the right closed question, it is often better to ask an open question as well to gain information that might alert you to a potential problem.

When facilitating one-on-one or group discussions, be aware that questions can be revised as needed. If you realize that a question is not going

to give the response you need, revise it. Sometimes closed questions obtain the same results as open questions, depending on the mood of the group, tone of voice, and the topic. However, when dealing with a difficult issue or a silent, closed group, an open question usually leads to the most complete, forthright responses.

Probing

Probing is a technique facilitators use to find out more information and to keep someone talking. Knowing when to probe is an important skill, as probing can make a positive difference in the quality and depth of the discussion and can unblock a group that is stuck. For example, when a group is making generalizations that do not further people's understanding of the topic, move the discussion along by probing for more details or examples.

Probing may help a group in one or more of the following ways:

- To find the root of an issue or problem;
- To enlighten other group members;
- To explore a concern or idea that may otherwise be overlooked;
- To encourage group members to explore issues in greater depth and to value their own thinking process;
- To open up the group to more honest sharing of information and concerns;
- To increase the trust level in the group;
- To uncover key facts that have not been brought out; and
- To increase creativity and open-mindedness.

Some of the most effective ways to probe are nonverbal: nodding the head, keeping direct eye contact, and remaining silent. These will often

encourage a group member to explore his or her own thinking further as you listen. Verbal techniques for probing range from a simple "Oh?" or "Hmmm" to more direct questions or requests, such as:

- "Why is that?"
- "What makes you think so?"
- "Tell me more about . . . ."
- "Does this relate to what Juan said earlier about . . . ?"
- "Explain what you mean by . . . ."
- "Could you be more specific?"
- "Can you go further into that?"
- "Can you give us an example?"
- "What else happened?"

Used selectively and in a caring, open way, probing is a useful and essential technique. However, do not overdo probing, as it may result in one or more of the following:

- Group members may feel interrogated;
- Other group members may feel left out while a dialogue goes on between you and one person;
- You may lose, or appear to lose, neutrality;
- It may appear that you have a hidden agenda; or
- Probing may lead the group down a path that goes nowhere.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is the act of *restating*, in your own words, what a person has said. This is a useful technique to check understanding with the speaker.

This gives the rest of the group a chance to check out their understanding as well. If you did not hear the message correctly, the speaker can correct the misunderstanding. For example, paraphrase by saying: "Let's see, Erica. If I understand correctly, you are saying. . . ." Use this technique primarily to increase understanding in a group and be careful not to use paraphrasing as an excuse to "sneak in" an opinion. Also, avoid giving the impression that you paraphrase to try to improve on, or add to, what was said. Whenever possible, the words of the group member should be honored and heard as coming from that person. Paraphrasing is highly useful, however, when a group member is struggling with expressing a difficult concept or idea or has expressed several ideas at once. Paraphrase to help the person clarify the idea or to focus on each idea that was presented so that it can be noted. Here are examples of how to paraphrase in some typical situations:

- (Group member not clear): "Let me see, Marina, if I understand what you are saying. . . ."
- (Group member presents several ideas or makes several points): "I think I hear several ideas we may want to capture. First, I think I heard you say. . . . Is that right?" (After capturing this idea): "Next, I heard you say. . . . Shall we capture that idea as well?" (etc.)

In most cases, no paraphrasing will be necessary, especially when you are recording each member's input on a flip chart or white board. Avoid paraphrasing every person's input. The best technique is to listen actively and record the speaker's key words. Here are some tips on how to use the paraphrasing technique:

- Paraphrase only to check for understanding;
- Do not paraphrase to improve upon the speaker's wording;
- Avoid adding to or changing what the speaker said;
- Try to use the speaker's exact wording when possible;
- Paraphrase when a group member is having difficulty expressing ideas more clearly; and

- Paraphrase, or simply restate what was said, when you think other members did not hear the speaker.

Redirecting Questions and Comments

Redirecting invites group members to respond to questions or comments that were directed to the facilitator. This technique encourages dialogue among participants and draws attention away from you. For example, when asked a question by one of the participants, say, "What do the rest of you think about that?" or "Someone else must have a response to that." The purpose of redirecting is to encourage group members to come up with their own solutions and thoughts as much as possible. This honors the group's own abilities and opinions and creates more buy-in. Redirecting puts the responsibility for the discussion on the group's shoulders, not on the facilitator's, and knits the participants together as a team. After a group is accustomed to you not offering opinions on the topic at hand, most group members will avoid asking for your opinion.

If a group member asks you to state an opinion on an issue, respond by redirecting. Here are a few examples:

- "Because the group will have to live by this decision, what I think is less valuable than what group members think. I'd like to toss that question back to the whole group."
- "As a facilitator, my role is to help you with the process; the content is something you will need to work out together. What do others think about that question?"
- "Good question! Let's toss that out to the whole group. What do group members think?"

If asked to share an opinion on the process the group is using, decide whether it is better to answer the question directly or to throw it open to the group. For example, if someone asks, "Do you really think we need the

whole day to deal with this issue?" you may choose to respond in one of several ways, depending on the situation:

- "This is a substantive issue, and I'd like to have the whole day to deal with it if needed."
- "Perhaps that's a question we should throw out to the group. Let's go quickly around the room and hear what everyone thinks. Do we really need the whole day for this issue?"
- "I would like to spend the whole day on this issue. However, I am open to hearing others' thoughts. What do others think?"

Redirecting maintains a balance of participation and helps group members respect and build on one another's ideas. Over time, group members become used to this approach and respond to one another more frequently; eventually, they direct their comments to one another.

Referencing Back

Referencing back is the technique of referring back to something one of the group members said earlier for the purposes of enhancing the discussion and tying group members' ideas to one another. When a participant says something similar to comments made earlier, you may want to point this out: "That may relate to what Jim said earlier. Jim, what is your response?" or "That sounds like the idea put forth by Pat and Amelia earlier today. How do the two ideas tie?" This encourages members to acknowledge and build on one another's ideas. This also gives the opportunity to disagree and to point out the differences between the ideas. This technique also encourages participants to listen better to one another. Sometimes, participants repeat what has already been said because they did not hear what was said before or wanted to say it their own way. Point out that a similar comment was made earlier, which encourages people to listen carefully and to relate their comments to what others have already said.

Another powerful benefit to the technique of referencing back is that it demonstrates that you are listening to everyone and giving credit to people for their comments. It is a sad fact in meetings that people often ignore others' comments and proceed as if certain things had not even been said. Referencing back teaches participants to listen to, acknowledge, and build on one another's ideas. Over time, group members will start pointing out that their comments relate to what someone said earlier. For example, a participant may say, "I'd like to reinforce what Tom said earlier about . . . . I've had the same experience. . . ."

This is also a good technique to balance participation. You may choose to refer back to an idea expressed by a quieter group member or one who is not in a position of power in the organization, to make sure this person is given credit and respect for sharing an idea.

Giving Positive Reinforcement

Positively responding to efforts made by group members to speak out is one way to encourage people to take risks in group work. For some people, it is intimidating to come up with a new idea or to point out some difficulty the group is having. For others, it is difficult to interrupt and interject their opinions. Still others fear recrimination. A sensitive facilitator uses positive reinforcement to encourage group members to break out of their comfort zones and participate. Positive comments can stimulate creativity, risk taking, and mutual respect.

A little positive reinforcement goes a long way, so do not overdo it. The trick is to be genuine without being repetitious, distracting, or manipulative. A simple "Thank you" or "Good! Let's write that idea down" can create an atmosphere of enthusiasm and trust. Personalize the meeting by using participants' names: "Thank you, Alanna, for pointing that out." The whole group needs positive reinforcement, too. "That's a tremendous list of ideas! You have all worked very hard" or "Thank you for putting forth such effort on this difficult activity. Let's take a well-deserved break!"

Do not comment after every input or continually thank the group. It is best to strike a balance between being unresponsive and being overly responsive. Use this technique to show support, encouragement, and appreciation for participants and to keep the energy level of the group high.

Including Quieter Members

In most groups and most discussions, there are those who are quieter than others and those who seldom contribute to the conversation. People may hesitate to speak up for a variety of reasons: (1) they may believe they have nothing to add to the discussion; (2) they may be shy about speaking in front of others; (3) they may feel it is impolite to jump in without being asked; (4) they may simply have nothing to say at that time; (5) they may resist being part of the group; or (6) they may wait for an accepting atmosphere before they risk making comments because they may have been in groups in which people were put down or attacked.

The facilitator plays a key role in encouraging all members to participate. First, be aware of who is participating and who is not. Second, use a few basic techniques to manage and try to balance participation at all times. Keep in mind that it is rare for a meeting to have completely equal or balanced participation; however, you are responsible for creating opportunities for everyone to contribute. Here are a few techniques to draw out quieter group members:

- Use a direct, but gentle approach: Call on the person by name and ask for his or her input. "Robin, what is your reaction to this?" or "Jesse, we haven't heard from you yet today; what do you think?"
- Ask everyone in the group to respond to the same question. Go around the group asking each person to respond.
- Refer back to comments made earlier by quieter participants. This continues to draw them into the group.

- Break the group into pairs or subgroups of three or four members each. Ask each small group to come up with responses and then report back to the entire group. This will give quieter participants more opportunity to speak.
- If there are several quieter members, or if one area of the room seems to be quiet, invite those people to contribute. "We haven't heard from some of you yet. What do the rest of you think?" or "Let's hear some comments from this side of the room."

New facilitators often fear that no one will speak up. Occasionally, everyone is silent. Learn to be comfortable with silence, especially after a question has been posed; people need time to think and formulate a response. New facilitators often are nervous with silence and jump in before people have time to contemplate a response. (See the section on silence in Chapter 4, Nonverbal Techniques.) If a group is truly silent and no one speaks up, here are a few techniques to help:

- Open with a nonthreatening, light-spirited icebreaker that requires people to introduce themselves. (See Chapter 14, Opening and Closing Activities.)
- Introduce the session in a way that will stimulate people's desire to speak out. For example, explain how a successful session will benefit each person.
- Use well-focused, open questions to kick off a discussion.
- Do not interrupt, judge, or respond negatively to anyone's input.
- Do not talk too much. Let the participants know from the beginning that you are there to listen and help them have a successful meeting.
- Do your homework before the session. Find out how people may react to the topic of the meeting and design your facilitation to compensate for any possibility. (See Chapter 12, How to Design a Facilitation.)
- If the group seems shy and unused to participating, give them an example of the type of response you are looking for. When someone

speaks up, thank him or her for the contribution. Use praise to build people's confidence.

- Avoid rescuing the group and filling in the silence. Let them know you understand that it may be difficult for them to speak up for one reason or another, but also let them know that their comments are valuable and why.

Sometimes groups are accustomed to meeting leaders who act as authority figures, presenting, but not inviting participation. Overcome this mind-set by demonstrating willingness and skill in listening to and recording people's ideas. After the group sees that it indeed can be productive, it will generally loosen up, and discussion will flow more freely.

If the group is particularly closed, and various techniques fail, do not blame yourself. Occasionally a group will not respond to facilitation or to a particular facilitator. Most of the time, you will face the opposite challenge: to manage groups with unwieldy amounts of data to generate, discuss, and prioritize.

Encouraging Divergent Views

Because both groups and facilitators prefer meetings to go smoothly, there is sometimes an effort to stick together, harmonize, and come up with the same views. People are not always comfortable "rocking the boat" or speaking up with a divergent opinion. Groups will often wait for the leader to voice an opinion and then chime in with supporting ideas or data.

Skilled facilitators notice when everyone seems to be agreeing early in the discussion and ask if there are any different or opposing views: "Everyone seems to be in agreement on this issue. Is there a different view or idea that we are overlooking?" or "Does someone have a different opinion on that?" or "This is a difficult and highly important topic. I sense that there may be different ideas and opinions. Does someone have a different viewpoint?"

There are, of course, groups that become firmly caught up in disagreement early on and this, too, blocks productivity. In these cases, after noting the various opinions, try to help the group see the views that are held in common. For example, say:

- "Clearly there is disagreement on this issue. On what can we all agree?" (Then make a list on a flip chart.)
- "There is a lot of disagreement on how we should solve this problem. Can we all agree, however, that the goal is . . . ? If this is our goal, what can we do first to make progress toward it?"

Shifting Perspective

Sometimes you must help a group shift perspective so it sees things from another vantage point. For example, when a group is caught up in detail, intervene by asking the group to look at the big picture. In the opposite situation, when a group is overly focused on the big picture, intervene by suggesting that the group cite details to support big-picture statements. Frequently, when a group is asked to list both the advantages and disadvantages of a particular situation or decision, members will come up with many more disadvantages than advantages, or vice versa. Steer the group toward a more balanced assessment by saying something like, "There are a lot of disadvantages listed here. What are some more advantages?" or "Everyone seems to see a lot of advantages to this idea. What are some of the disadvantages?"

This simple technique encourages openness and creativity, and may be just what is needed to increase the synergy of the group or cause someone to state a major point.

Summarizing

Summarizing is an important technique to keep a group focused. From time to time, generally after a lot of points have been made, data gener-

ated, or activities completed, briefly summarize what has been said or done before moving on. The tricky part of summarizing is to *summarize*—be brief and to the point. A tendency of new facilitators is to summarize by going into too much detail. With practice, the skill of being clear and concise can be developed.

Another approach to summarizing is to ask someone in the group to summarize what has been said so far. Be patient with group members, because they may not know how to summarize. Nevertheless, it is a good way to build this skill in the group and to keep everyone alert to what is going on. The best way is to ask, "Would someone like to summarize what has been said so far?" It is not a good time to call on a particular person. Someone might be caught off guard, or time could be wasted if the person is not ready to summarize. After asking if someone will summarize, give people time to think. If no one volunteers, go ahead, saying something like, "Well, let me try to summarize this time." Occasionally ask group members to summarize, as this increases group ownership for the process, teaches group members a valuable skill, and empowers the group to work with its own data.

When summarizing, do not insert your own opinions or weight the summary toward your own views. With practice, you can make a brief, neutral summary without changing the meaning of the discussion so far.

When there have been a lot of disagreements or data is diverse, it may be difficult to summarize the content of what has been said. In this case, simply summarize what has occurred and then make a suggestion, for example, "As you can see, there is disagreement over the best method to . . . . Three methods have been discussed. First . . . , second . . . , and third. . . . The next step will be to evaluate each method and try to reach consensus on which will best achieve your goals."

Sometimes you must summarize what has been going on (the process) and not the content: "A lot of material has been presented on Method A, but no one has presented material on Methods B or C. How can we bring out more information on Methods B and C?"

Bridging

To stop one activity and move on to the next, facilitators use a technique called bridging. Make a "bridge" by saying a few words about what has just happened and what the group will be doing next. Summarizing is simply the first step in making an effective bridge to the next activity. If you are going to give the group a break between activities, summarize, give the group a break, and bridge over to the next activity when the group returns from break. This gives a chance to review the next planned activity to see whether it is appropriate based on what the group has done so far. If the group's energy is depleted, give the group a break before summarizing and then summarize and bridge after the break.

For example, after an active brainstorming session, summarize by saying, "You have come up with a long list of ideas to improve customer service. Our next step will be to make sure everyone understands all of the ideas before we discuss their merits or problems. Are there any items that need further clarification?"

Use all of these verbal techniques to help the group achieve its purpose. Some nonverbal techniques are explored in the next chapter.