

Tips for Participating in an IF Discussion

As participants your role is really to help each other to have a good exploratory discussion. The goal is to expand the perspectives under consideration and to develop divergent possibilities. Try to help your facilitator by helping each other to explore alternative ideas in a generous and cooperative way. A few tips that will help you elevate your discussion include:

- Set up a shared understanding** about how you will engage each other in conversation. To get things started, you might observe some basic ground-rules like being respectful, talking in turn, making sure everyone participates, and trying not to dominate the conversation.

- Practice saying, “Yes—and...”** Try to build on each other’s ideas as they come up rather than evaluating or criticizing them right away.

- Be yourself—and be someone else.** Share what you think—then use your imagination to think beyond yourself. Imagine someone from another walk of life or with other perspectives than your own. What would they add? What is the group overlooking?

- Be generous of spirit.** Help each other to think through ideas. Try to find the grains of truth in the ideas of others, even if you don’t agree with them. Focus on exploring the content of ideas rather than the persons who introduce them. Help each other explore and flesh out ideas even if you disagree with them.

- Be bold and go deep.** Bring up ideas regardless of whether you think they might meet approval or regardless of whether you think they might work out. Sometimes innovative ideas seem crazy at first because they go beyond current conventions.

Tips for Facilitating an IF Discussion

1. Develop a plan for the discussion

- What's your goal for the session? What will the group explore or develop?
- Focusing on your goal, sketch out a number of prompts or questions that can help the group to uncover different aspects of the topic. Create several different prompts in case one doesn't work to stimulate discussion. Avoid yes/no questions. Think about ways to reframe questions or to provide examples to help the group if they get stuck. It's good to have extra questions in reserve.
- Anticipate different possible directions. Think about different dimensions of the topic that could or should be explored. This is helpful for developing discussion prompts and will help you think on your feet. Keep in mind—a discussion plan has to be flexible. It is not a rigid formula.

2. Facilitating the actual discussion

- Set the tone** for an imaginative, serious, and fun exploratory conversation. It's not a debate.
- Facilitator ≠ Discussion Leader.** Your role is to help the group help each other to chart uncharted territory—not to lead them to a pre-determined location. A good conversation typically unfolds organically in a non-linear fashion. Avoid being overly directive and avoid steering the discussion. Be adaptable. Don't rigidly follow your discussion plan.
- Facilitator ≠ Bystander.** Your role is to encourage the group to expand the perspectives they explore. Challenge the group if they get in a rut and exclude alternative points of view. Avoid being overly passive. Use questions or examples to expand the discussion.
- Manage the flow**
 - Take flipchart notes to help the group pace itself and to build on ideas rather than jumping around superficially. This helps reassure the group that their ideas are being heard. It also helps you focus your attention on the ideas that emerge.
 - Guide the flow by asking follow-up questions ("What do you mean by that?", "How can we build on that idea?", "What are some other perspectives on that?")
 - Engage every participant ("No one speaks twice until we hear from everyone at least once"). Asking participants to write down some ideas at the start can help ensure that everyone has something to say. Ask outspoken people to hold back when you need to hear from others.
 - Ride the waves and make room for silence. Discussions ebb and flow. Silence often means that people are thinking. Don't panic when things get quiet.
 - Encourage participants to build on each other's ideas. Help the group see connections ("How does this relate to what ___ said earlier about ___?").
 - Dissolve tensions and conflicts by reminding the group that this is an expansive exploratory discussion. You want to include divergent ideas, not pick winners.

3. Next Steps

- Let the group know the next steps in the discussion process. This may be a topic for group discussion. What will be done with the results of today's discussion?
- Documenting the discussion. Create a thematic (not a narrative) summary of the discussion for the group. You can sort out the key headings or categories that emerged in the discussion in the form of bullet points. Then sort the different perspectives as items under those headings. You can highlight connections and areas for future development. Don't record who said what.