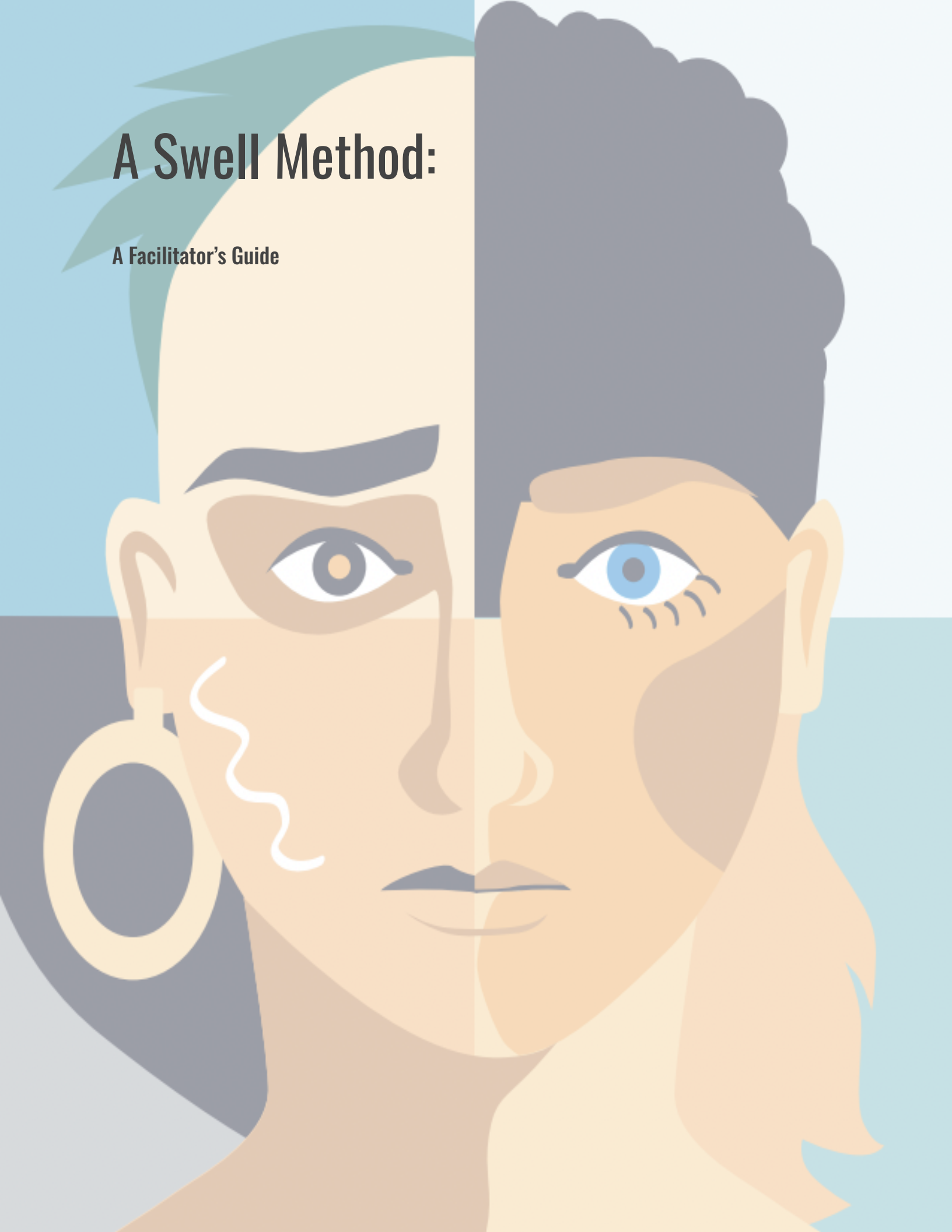


A Swell Method:

A Facilitator's Guide



PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

Humans need each other. Study after study¹ point to isolation as a risk factor for depression and even physical disease. The human mind, spirit, and body need time in community with others in order to thrive. We crave togetherness in times of crisis and in times of celebration. Community can heal, and intentional time with one another can set the stage for solving our most daunting challenges. We have gathered to learn, worship, celebrate, and mourn for time immemorial.

Diverse communities, specifically those of systematically marginalized identities, need safe and thriving communities of care in which they can hold and be held through joy, strife, learning, and growing together. Research² points to the additive negative impact on an individual's wellness as a result of navigating subtle or overt racism and other implicit and explicit biases acted upon by individuals or represented in systems. Facilitation requires a mindset that trusts in the mathematics of positive sum game theory. The facilitator enters the field with the belief that we can be stronger together, that we can resolve conflicts by getting creative, and that no one needs to lose when we problem-solve together. Facilitators represent the vanguard accelerating our shift into a new reality where power is fuel, not a weapon.

The role of convener, space holder, and ritual guide is a sacred role that can be strenuous but deeply rewarding. This role has developed into many different vocations, such as therapist, pastor, teacher, coach, and facilitator. Facilitation as its own vocation has emerged more visibly over the last 20 years as cultural expectations of collaboration have evolved. More and more, facilitation is being recognized as an important role in any social enterprise and facilitation is an especially fundamental role for any leader representing systematically marginalized communities (or their allies) seeking to transform “power over” practices within systems.

This guide is meant to complement the Swell Collective's Facilitators Academy program. It contains an overview of the what, why, and how of the Swell approach to facilitation, and represents our shared commitment to praxis for all Swell events and spaces. Please note this is a living guide and will iterate and improve over time as all of life and learning should.

¹ Social disconnectedness, perceived isolation, and symptoms of depression and anxiety among older Americans (NSHAP) (<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnmol.2018.00246/full>)
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2468266719302300>

² Project MUSE (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/376347>)

You are welcome to use this guide with attribution and we are grateful for the intersectional elders, wisdom keepers and practitioners who have illuminated the way for all of us and elevated the visibility of this work. If you would like to contribute to the iteration of this guide contact us at info@swellcollective.org

WHAT IS FACILITATION?

Facilitation is the art and science of creating spaces and guiding practices that allow people to:

- Consider themselves in symbiotic relationship
- Build trust
- Deeply understand needs
- Share perspectives, learn, and build collective understanding
- Ideate creative options
- Reveal and identify criteria by which they evaluate ideas
- Imagine and articulate robust possibilities
- Heal themselves and the collective community.

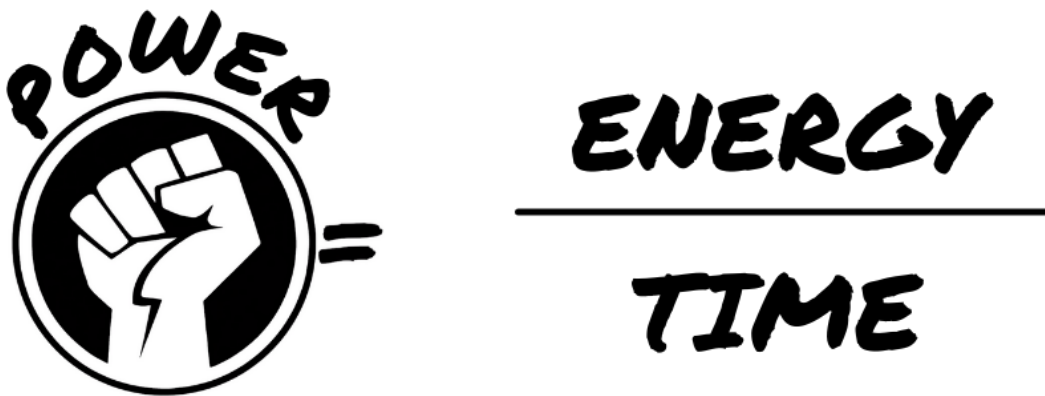
Facilitation is the practice of serving groups of people in order to bring ease to the group's shared purpose and purpose to the group's shared experience. Facilis, the Latin root of the word, means easy. Facilitators guide routines and practices in service to the group's needs. They ensure the balancing of power, voices, and energies. Facilitators practice continuous active listening by synthesizing, illustrating, and regularly reflecting understanding in service to the group's purpose. Facilitation is an active, responsive, and dynamic role that can change moment to moment, is rarely the same twice, yet always identifiable upon inquiry. In this way, as stated above it is an art and a science. Each facilitator may show up differently and draw a unique facilitation scene, even while working with the same tools. The work is rooted in principles and practices that can be applied in any space where people come together.

WHY FACILITATION?

Facilitation skills rooted in equity and healing are foundational to being an effective leader in the 21st century. These skills are transferable to any multi-constituency and diverse participatory setting and across any topic of collaborative effort. These skills are indispensable in the diverse communities where movement organizing and social enterprise happens. Where groups seek to serve the collective or public good, facilitation is essential. All facilitators become leaders. Not all leaders are born facilitators. Facilitation at its essence

serves two universal purposes that groups have when they come together. Groups desire to **build relationships** via shared experience (ie to learn, reflect, and BE together), and many groups will eventually need to **make decisions together** (ie to analyze, respond, and DO together).

Facilitation unlocks the value of social and human capital in communities and in organizations. Facilitation can accelerate trust building, thus strengthening ties in social networks^{3,4}. Where there are stronger ties, consensus-based decision making is more likely to be achieved. Consensus based decision making is the pinnacle of distributed power, upending millennia of “power over” decision making. While at times it can seem to take longer to make decisions in this manner, consensus-based decisions have the most legitimacy and likelihood of buy-in. They also have better potential to stand the test of time and allow for being agile and responsive to changing conditions. Effective facilitation moves groups through uncomfortable conflict in ways that result in new learning, deeper trust, and collective innovation. Facilitation helps groups more effectively use their time. Time is a precious and finite resource. By strengthening ties, building trust, and new learning, while making effective use of time, facilitation helps grow power and helps groups apply that power as fuel for positive change.



³ The Strength of Trust Over Ties (<https://academic-publishing.org/index.php/ejkm/article/view/1128>)

⁴ Trust and the Strength of Ties in Social Networks (<https://carlsonschool.umn.edu/sites/carlsonschool.umn.edu/files/2018-10/misq-rb-sr-ag-as-final.pdf>)

HOW DO WE FACILITATE?

Swell facilitators ground all facilitation with two standard practices: **affirming our collective intentions** that articulates what that facilitated space will look like, and **thoughtful inquiry** intended to guide that dialogue. Swell's facilitation is rooted in our Transformative Space Intentions (TSI). The TSI represent our collective commitment to how we will be in relationship with one another. By affirming the TSI, participants affirm they are ready and equipped to assume best intentions, lower walls, and work through conflicts in a brave and authentic way. This provides an important touchstone for accountability.

Affirming our collective intentions

If trust is being offered or invited, we owe our participants an explanation of what they can expect in exchange for that trust, namely an environment where it will be safe to be brave. When people feel free to share and express what might feel difficult or uncomfortable, growth begins and learning can happen. Conversely, it is unethical to expect vulnerability from individuals and communities without any practical standards for how we will make it safe to participate in this manner. When we create the pathway for authenticity and trust to emerge, the group takes on a shared collective identity further strengthening ties in a positive feedback loop. The group becomes greater than the sum of its parts just for having been together through that emergence. Affirming our collective intentions grows social capital. We know this social capital to be a rich and renewable source of energy in systems, especially in communities experiencing historical and institutional marginalization and disenfranchisement.

Thoughtful inquiry

Facilitators also ask questions. Thought provoking questions represent a key tool in the facilitator's toolbox. A well crafted question can reveal layers of insights, providing organic guidance and direction for a conversation. This inquiry and curiosity are what we hope to foster in the spaces we facilitate. Moreso, participants learn by modeling. Often they'll pick up on what was beneficial about this kind of conversation and mimic it in future situations. By modeling the practice of asking questions, we also tacitly give permission for participants to feel safe doing the same. This alone can be a huge growth edge for some. Thoughtful inquiry contributes to revealing new knowledge. This human capital is also a renewable source of energy in systems.

Facilitation for Universal Purpose 1: Building Relationships

Facilitators lead in the responsibility for curating, creating, and caring for the shared space occupied by participants, so that participants can be fully present in dialogue with each other. Sometimes we call this shared space the “container”. Some engagements happen live, while others happen virtually. There are also asynchronous spaces, such as pre-recorded training sessions and discussion forums, or Facebook groups. In all of these cases, some work is needed on the part of the facilitator to set the tone, guide a process for co-creating norms for engagement, build community, and ensure a safe environment rooted in equity. What those unique routines and practices look like will vary depending on the kind of space the facilitator is curating and the unique needs of the participants within it. Facilitators will take into consideration the affordances, limitations and opportunities across these methods of communication and develop engagement necessary to maintain and build relationships across platforms and methods.

Generally speaking, when bringing these spaces together, online or off, synchronous or asynchronous, facilitators will 1) open the space, 2) hold and care for the space and 3) close the space. There are unique routines and practices for each of those stages. All of this serves the purpose of building relationships. Intention paid to this purpose pays dividends by growth in human and social capital. Even if groups aren't meeting to make a decision, the group ties can be strengthened through intentional and customized engagement.

Routines and Practices of Opening

As we open an engagement, we most often Invite participants to affirm a collective commitment to how we will each show up in the space. For Swell, this is the [Transformative Space Intentions](#). Depending on the size of the group and the length of the meeting or series, we may include an activity to lift up shared and transformative accountability, engaging in a dialogue about what we will do together if behavior emerges that is out of alignment with this commitment. A possible question we can pose is: *How would you like to be held accountable if someone feels as if your behavior is out of alignment with our commitment?*

It is deeply important in our methods of facilitation that we be intentional and always strive to make what we may consider implicit, explicit. Every group should develop, early on, a shared understanding of the expectations for how we intend to be in this group with one another. Oftentimes groups jump right into what they are going to do together then run into intractable conflict when they find that they didn't have shared commitments to, or

understanding of, trust, communication, authenticity, and power. Our TSI cover important facets of thriving relationships we know to be deserving of time and attention.

Our emotions, communication, understanding, respect, trust, and power are all being navigated in overlapping and interdependent ways whenever we are in community with even one other person. We all bring expectations, habits, and **growth edges** to these spaces along all these facets. Effective facilitators help participants exert their collective agency and responsibility for keeping a safe and thriving relationship space. In time, everyone comes to see that relationships are the invisible connective tissue holding any group together. When we do this from the outset, we spend much less time later correcting our relationship mistakes and dealing with fallout. While this may seem like slowing down to some, it is actually an effectiveness accelerator.

At the start of each session, we always begin with some form of a check in. The check in primes our physiology for higher order thinking and human connection. It also allows us to calibrate the agenda to respond to the needs of the participants. The check in can be as simple as asking the question: *How are you feeling in this moment?* If the group has a more formal agenda or will be engaging in a decision making process, we will engage in interactive agenda calibration based on the answers to questions from check in such as What are your expectations for today?

Routines and Practices of Holding & Care: Circles, Dialogue, and Memorializing

Circles

Circles are a practice that have deep ancestral roots across so many cultures. They likely emerged as we gathered around fires for sustenance and safety. We've told stories in circles and shared prayers in circles for time immemorial. A circle can simply be posing a question to a group and allowing each person to answer in turn, while the facilitator memorializes the contributions, asks clarifying questions and minds the time agreed upon for each participant's contributions. Participants are welcome to pass their turn, but all participants will have equal opportunity to contribute. The facilitator's role is to ensure this.

Dialogue

Dialogue is distinct from discussion. The purpose of dialogue is to develop new and shared understandings. Dialogue is part of a consensus-based decision making process but can also be effective for this Universal Purpose of building relationships and new understanding. By the practice of active listening and the attention to the dynamic facets of relationship, the

facilitator creates the conditions for the group to surface new insights and deeper understanding. Sometimes, leveraging different media, such as video clips or sound bites, to illustrate this understanding can be helpful to meet diverse learning styles.

Memorializing

Sometimes called “group memory” it can be helpful to keep a record of contributions and insights in group work. Recording contributions and learning on a shared canvas such as butcher paper on the wall or a digital version such as [Miro](#) helps participants feel seen and heard and contributes to the development of shared understanding. Generally, the “group memory” is distinct from meeting notes or minutes in that it is collectively owned rather than attributed to each participant (ie group memory isn’t: “Jane said...., John said....”). Unless there is a specific reason that a contribution needs to be attributed, the facilitator and the group are memorializing new and shared collective understanding.

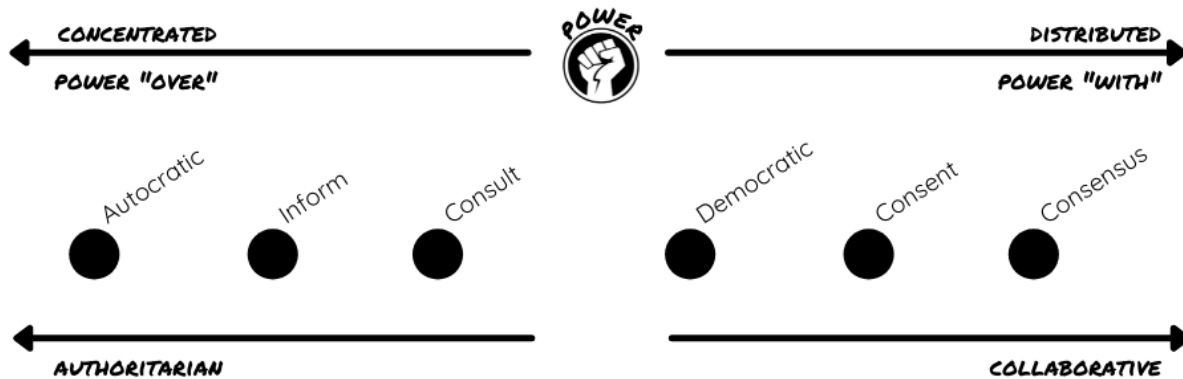
Routines and Practices of Closing

The plus and delta check out can help facilitators better serve. A question for closing can be as simple as, “*About today’s gathering, what worked and what didn’t?*”. A closing ritual could also be a review of opening commitments and a question to the participants such as “About today, what will you say and what would you like to hear said?”.

Facilitation for Universal Purpose 2: Decision Making

Deciding how to decide

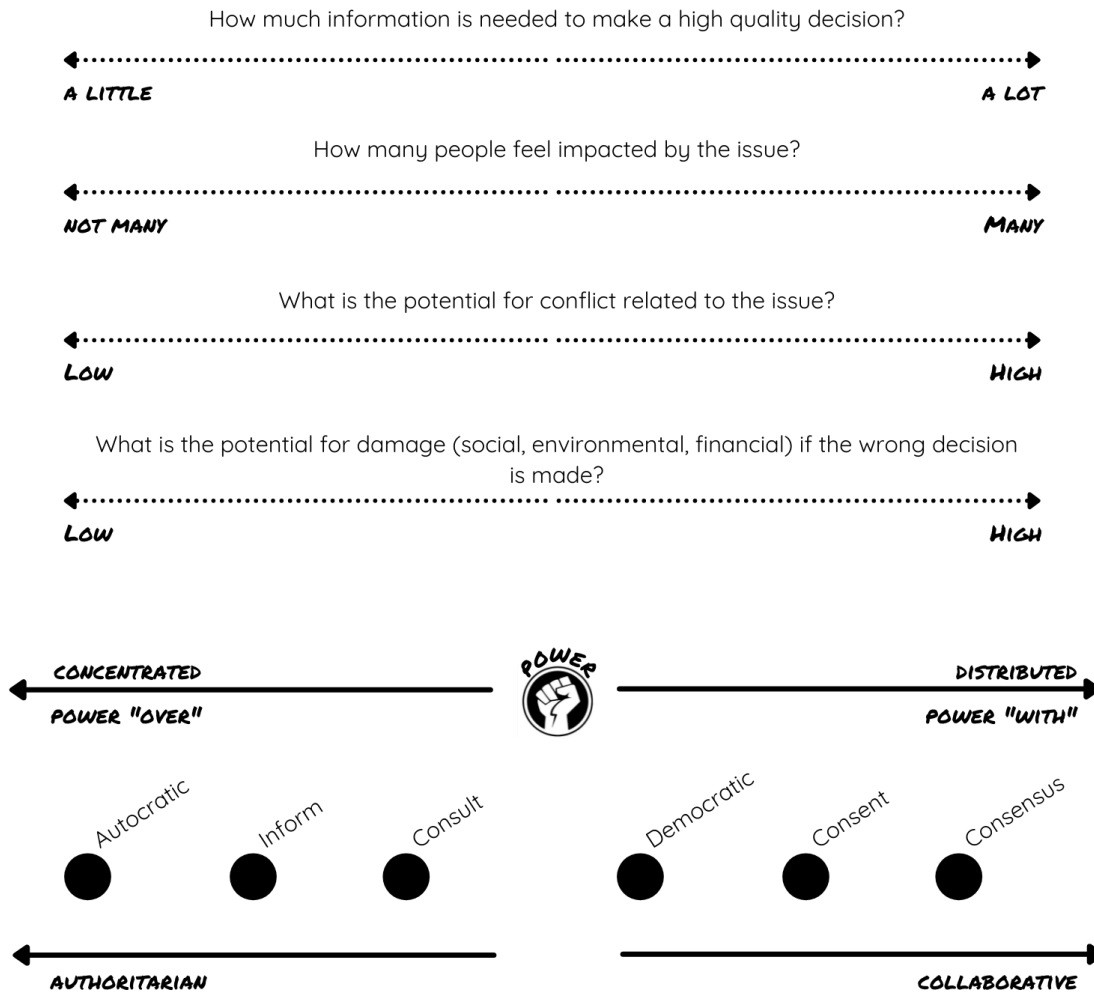
Clear distinction of decision making is imperative. The facilitator can serve the group by providing this clarity. A question that a facilitator might ask is “It sounds like the group needs to make a decision. Do we need to move into decision making?”. The facilitator can then offer a number of different options for decision making so that the group can decide together how to decide. Generally, decision making falls on a power spectrum from concentrated to distributed, or authoritarian to collaborative.



- Autocratic – one power holder (can be an individual or an entity) is making the decision, and the rest of the group is not involved in making the decision in any way except for perhaps being delegated implementation.
- Inform – one power holder (can be an individual or an entity) makes the decision, and informs the rest of the group of the decision that was made after the fact.
- Consult – one power holder (can be an individual or an entity) is making the decision after consulting the group members and explicitly soliciting their input.
- Democratic – the group is using a democratic vote to make the decision. The group will move forward with the option with the most votes/majority/supermajority.
- Consent – all group members must not object to the decision for it to stand. Objections must be articulated.
- Consensus - all members of the group assent that the decision is the best way forward or at minimum that they can “live with the decision” or view it as “safe enough to try”, for now. Group agrees to evaluate the time period of “for now” to continue to poll consensus.

A facilitator can illustrate and assist a group arrive at a decision about deciding by asking the following questions and using the answers to guide the group to the most effective model.

**QUESTIONS TO GUIDE
DECIDING HOW TO DECIDE:**



Because of the diverse groups we work with and the complex issues they are addressing, we most often find ourselves facilitating collaborative decision making.

Consensus-Based Decision Making

Consensus-based decision making marks the pinnacle of collaborative process. Facilitators engage participants in a dynamic process to arrive at consensus. This process includes an invitation to them to withhold their commitment to a solution or evaluation of ideas until initial phases are complete. As evaluation and judgements often enter the conversations anyways, the facilitator can use these as ways to learn more about unmet needs or parts of the problem unexplored and in this way route energy back into dialogue. While this process

is dynamic, the facilitator ensures that all of these stages occur.

1. **Dialogue:** The problem, issue or opportunity in need of a decision is explored in depth. Facilitation questions during this phase include:
 - What is going on?
 - Who is impacted?
 - What are their needs?
 - What are the constraints?
 - What are the criteria of success?
 - What are the content, process and relationship facets of this issue?
2. **Creativity:** Participants are invited to engage in open ended ideation without evaluation in the moment. The goal of this phase is to generate a rich list of possible options from which to surface the most fitting decision. “Brainstorming” is a term often used to describe this phase and there are a number of techniques facilitators can use to generate this rich pool of options. The exercise during this phase is one concerned with quantity over quality. Refining for quality comes in the next phase. Facilitation questions during this phase include:
 - What is the universe of possible solutions?
 - What are others doing that we could learn from?
 - What could we do without limitations?
3. **Decide/Commit/Implement:** After exhaustive creative ideation, groups are invited to move into evaluation of all the options. The facilitator assists the group by illustrating the criteria that emerged during dialogue (needs, constraints, other criteria) and guides the group in activities to compare the options to these criteria as a way of filtering the list of options. A simple question to pose here is: Which of these options best meet our needs? Once the list is filtered, the facilitator will check for consensus and commitment: Can we commit to this? Will we share ownership? If consensus is achieved, the facilitator can assist the group with planning implementation and identifying points in time to evaluate and refine the implementation to make an opportunity to ask: How is it going? Has the situation changed?

Collaborative process is dynamic, iterative and ongoing. While we can clearly identify phases, it is done best when it is happening in the context of deepening, evolving and ongoing relationships. When done effectively, the shared experience of collaborative decision making improves the quality of the relationships, builds trust and strengthens ties.

WHEN DO WE FACILITATE?

As a facilitator, you may find yourself serving ongoing group gatherings of the same participants (like a classroom teacher), ongoing group gatherings of different participants (community meetings), time bound series of gatherings, or one-off meetings. Any of these gatherings may be seeking to achieve either or both of the universal purposes. Important to note that in order to effectively and equitably make decisions, groups first need to achieve purpose number one, which is to build relationships. We must have a healthy community relationship space in order for effective consensus based decision making to happen. The two are interdependent and synergistic. The following are some examples of how these different purposes show up.

Universal Purpose 1: Build Relationships

Communities of care & peer support

These gatherings are focused on providing thriving spaces of community healing and care. They may have loose agendas and just be a place for folks to enjoy a safe and affirming space with one another and to check in periodically to offer peer support and accountability. They can be identity or role based (ie a group for school administrators of color that meets monthly for lunch).

Communities of learning & practice

These gatherings are focused on learning together and sharing peer support around a specific topic, sector or theme. A book club could be a community of learning and practice. A training is a community of learning and practice. A class can be a community of learning and practice.

Communities to honor seasons: celebrations & transitions

These gatherings happen according to calendered or co-experienced seasons or dates. A wedding or a shared solstice ritual would be examples.

Universal Purpose 2: Decision Making

Any time folks need to form a plan, decide on what to do (or how to be), change processes, or agree on collective action or restoration, a decision is being made. Governance and planning are examples of engagement in pursuit of universal purpose number two. Oftentimes, we conflate dialogue with discussion or deciding, and often, conflict arises because people have

different ideas of how decisions should be made, who should do the deciding, or what is even being decided. Without giving specific attention to all of these factors, it is very possible participants could end up in an entirely different, or more complex, situation than the one they started with. Facilitators help draw a clear attention to decision making. Facilitators can serve any number of decision making opportunities to ensure effective use of time and clear understanding such as:

- Board meetings
- Strategic Planning
- Contract Negotiations
- New group/organization formation
- New technology or curriculum adoptions
- Restorative Accountability processes
- IEP meetings (Individualized education plans - unique to the education sector)

Effective facilitation of decision making ensures that decisions address the systemic parts of any issue. These parts are content, process and relationship. These interdependent facets should be explored and considered in all decisions.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

Preparing to Facilitate and Care of the Facilitator

As stated earlier in this guide, facilitation can be a strenuous practice, even as it is deeply rewarding. Facilitators have a duty to keep themselves centered and well as they engage in facilitation, especially should conflict or discomfort emerge in any group we are facilitating. Our physiology affects our cognition and the environment in which we are facilitating. Mirror neurons cause other people to align with our emotions at the subconscious level. We must maintain a regular practice of self care that can include meditation, exercise, and ongoing personal and professional development. Facilitation is an embodied practice. Keeping our minds and bodies well is part of the responsibilities of being an effective and ethical facilitator.

Allowing ourselves ample time for preparing to facilitate is an essential habit. Intentional design of an agenda and time to center ourselves will add time to the practice. Be mindful of this as you commit your time. Facilitators should also carve out time for themselves (and in service to the group) to capture personal reflections about the evolution of their practice and any process insights discovered with the group. Participating in a community of practice with other facilitators can help refine and expand one's practice. Facilitators may often find

themselves isolated from professional peers in this work. Find a community of support and learning. This vocation is a lifelong pursuit.

What's next

This guide is an evolving resource offered as part of the Swell Collective's Facilitator Academy program. The program includes a community of learning and practice made up of all participants in the Academy in addition to other practicing facilitators with consultancies of their own or working as facilitators within their organization. [Please visit the academy to learn more.](#)

Appendix

GLOSSARY OF TERMS/ PHRASES

Caring for the space - action taken to maintain the energy, safety, community, and integrity of a container

Closing the space - intentional action(s) to check out with participants and conclude a convening

Collaborative process - a structured process by which participants share and build off of one another's suggestions to move a conversation or problem solving effort forward

Collective action - united action carried out by a group of individuals in the interest of meeting their needs.

Collective restoration - the process by which a group of people tends to their collective wounds and ensures their collective wellbeing. In this case, the wellbeing of the community overall is considered as well as that of the individual and used as the metric for success.

Community of care - a group of people with a shared understanding that they'll support, encourage, and care for one another, either pertaining to a specific goal, or generally.

Community of learning - a group of people committed to learning and growing with one another in reference to a specific topic

Community of practice - a group of people honing their skills in a certain area who agree to share findings, road blocks, or best practices in an effort to build collective wisdom and community while learning

Connective tissue - Intangible social connections binding people together, strengthening their connection. These relationships may be improved upon or weakened overtime, which affects the strength of this tissue solidifying and strengthening the group as a whole

Consensus-based decision making⁵ - a creative and dynamic way of reaching agreement between all members of a group. Instead of simply voting for an item and having the majority of the group getting their way, a group using consensus is committed to finding solutions that everyone actively supports, or at least can live with

Embodied practice⁶ - a method of using the unique sensations of one's body as a tool to develop awareness, stay present, self-regulate, feel whole, find balance, feel connected, know oneself, love oneself and be empowered. In the context of facilitation, one's natural impulses and sense of conversation, progress, tension, and resolution provide meaningful guidance for the facilitator to help facilitate the group in a way that's comfortable, natural, and responsive

⁵ Seeds for Change (<https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/consensus>)

⁶ Somatic Movement Project (<https://somatic-movement-project.com/why-cultivate-a-somatic-practice/>)

Growth edges - tasks that don't come naturally to us. The verbiage positions them as opportunities for growth while acknowledging that it may be challenging for the participant currently

Human capital⁷ - the aggregate value of the skills, knowledge, health, and experience possessed by an individual or population

Needs - a person or group's physical or emotional requirements

Opening the space - the process by which a person or group intentionally begins a convening

Restorative accountability - a method by which an issue is tended to that centers repair and healing in its metrics for resolution

Routines and Practices of Closing - The process by which a person or group intentionally ends a convening

Shared space - physical or theoretical space being utilized and maintained by multiple participants

Shared understanding - a group's cumulative perception of an issue based on one or multiple series of fact sharing and discussion amongst participants

Social capital⁸ - the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.

Systemic marginalization - a socioeconomic condition of disadvantage created by socially constructed inequitable forces of bias.

Universe of possibilities - the exhaustive range of options surrounding a process or decision. Considering the "universe of possibilities" challenges participants to generate new and creative options so that once a decision is made there is confidence that all options have been considered.

⁷ Oxford (https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/human_capital)

⁸ Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 119