

HOW TO HIRE A FACILITATOR or TRAINER

At different times in our lives, we experience the need to hire a professional to provide some service that we cannot perform ourselves. Whether it's a car mechanic or a lawyer, the less we know about the field, the more difficult it is to evaluate and choose the right person.

Increasingly, cohousing (and other) groups are acknowledging the value of utilizing professional facilitators and trainers to help improve their meetings, resolve conflicts, and build their communication skills. During the ten years I've been involved with cohousing, I've been on both sides of the table – as a group member doing the hiring and as a facilitator being hired. Here are some tips that will help the process go more smoothly.

When should we hire a facilitator or trainer?

A facilitator can help if your group is dealing with a divisive or complicated issue; as a neutral outsider, s/he can help the group get “unstuck” by reframing the question and creating different exercises that help the group come to a new understanding or solution. If the group is experiencing moderate conflict, you might want to bring someone in *before* things get totally to the disaster stage!

Even if your group has excellent facilitators in-house, there may be times when you would benefit from everyone being able to participate fully without having to hold the neutral facilitator role. Visioning and strategic planning sessions can especially benefit from outside assistance.

Bringing in a trainer periodically can help the community “tune-up” its communication skills and remind everyone that good process is important. My community has used a variety of different trainers, generally one per year, throughout our ten years together. We consider it an important investment in community success and happiness.

How do I find a facilitator/trainer?

Most of my clients find me via recommendations from other clients. So ask around! Both the [Cohousing Association](#) and the [Fellowship for Intentional Community](#) websites include directories of professionals who have experience working with communities. Many regions have a volunteer center or other agency that assists nonprofits; they often have a directory for local referrals. The [International Association of Facilitators](#) also has a directory; their members include facilitators who work in corporate settings. One caveat: there are many good facilitators working in different contexts who may not understand cohousing dynamics. The depth of emotional connection and expression that can exist in cohousing and other intentional communities can be very different than what is usual in nonprofit or corporate settings!

What questions should I ask a potential facilitator/trainer?

Ask your potential hire how they work and what they consider to be their specialty, their strengths, and their weaknesses. Find out if they have worked with groups in similar situations to yours. Do they have “canned” workshops or will they customize for you? Ask them for references -- and then call them! Different trainers and facilitators have different personalities, styles, and specialties. So do individual communities. Talking to other clients can help you find a good match.

A word about scheduling and fees...

I've lost track of the number of calls I've gotten that began with, “Are you available this weekend, and how much do you charge?” When I tell them my rates and that I'm pretty much booked for the next three months, I hear either silence or a great big gulp.

I had pretty much the same response the first time I tried to hire a facilitator. The quote that sounded so astronomical then actually sounds like quite a bargain to me now!

Professional facilitation is a skilled service, for which we have gone through extensive training and education. If you only think about the number of hours spent in the actual meeting, the cost per hour may seem high. However, a good facilitator will spend *at least* as much time in preparation as in running the actual meeting. I typically spend anywhere from one to three hours in preparation for each hour of actual meeting time. As a self-employed consultant, I also have overhead costs such as office supplies, phone charges, marketing expenses, and continuing education.

(A great article on facilitator fees is available online at http://www.leadershipguru.com/facilitator_cost.pdf.)

Before you make the call, it might help to come up with a list of potential dates so that you don't have to go through multiple iterations with the facilitator and the rest of your group. Also keep in mind that the facilitator will need some preparation time. The busier his or her practice, the farther out s/he will be booked.

Ask yourself the following questions, so that when the potential facilitator asks *you*, you have an answer ready!

What questions should a potential facilitator/trainer ask *me*?

A good facilitator will ask you a *lot* of questions. S/he may also want to talk directly with multiple members of your group in order to get the most complete picture of your situation. As you think through some of these questions, remember that s/he will be looking for an aerial view, rather than street-level details.

Some questions you may be asked:

- What are the roots of the issue/conflict?
- What are you hoping to accomplish?
- What have you already tried in your quest for resolution?
- What is your goal for the day? What would success look like?
 - A conflict resolved?
 - An action plan?
 - A decision made?
- What do you want to learn?
 - Communication skills?
 - Better understanding of consensus?
 - Conflict resolution skills?

S/he may wish to see copies of relevant documents such as your group's vision statement, decision-making agreements, or policies relevant to the current issue. S/he'll want to know about your group's norms, values, ground rules, rituals, cultural issues: Do you tend to like or hate "touchy-feely" exercises? Do you start and end meetings in any particular way – a bell, check-ins, a song? Do you use colored cards?

As the facilitator gets a firmer understanding of the group's needs, s/he'll start working with you to plan out the agenda, devising processes and exercises to help you accomplish your goals. The conversation will shift from content (what are the details of the problem or issue) to process (how can we best structure the meeting in order to achieve the desired goals).

Wrapping it up

The final piece to consider is logistics – room, materials, food, lodging, number of participants, etc. You'll need to be clear on who is responsible for copying handouts, making sure there are markers and flipcharts, etc. Before you even start calling potential facilitators/trainers, designate one of your members to be the main logistical liaison. Even if multiple committee members are participating in the screening process, it will avoid confusion if there is one repository for all the information and one person doing the final negotiations.

Some consultants will ask you to sign a contract and/or pay a deposit in advance. (This is de rigueur in corporate settings but not as common among those who predominately work with intentional communities, in my experience.) Don't be put off by this, as it is a tool for making sure that your mutual agreements are clear.

I hope that these tips make your next hiring interaction smoother and more successful for everyone!