

Restating: A Guide for Facilitators

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Restating is one of the most important skills you can cultivate as a facilitator. Because restating technique is deeply personal and particular to each facilitator, it can be difficult to practice and to plan for. Here are some helpful ideas for how you can restate effectively when facilitating.

Why Restate?

Restating serves several purposes in a meeting. By restating, you affirm that you have heard what has been said, and you take the opportunity to check in with participants about whether or not you and others truly understand the content of what has been said. Restating the content of the conversation periodically can go a long way towards preventing the repetition and interruption that arises when participants feel unheard or confused about the direction of the conversation.

Restating also offers you and the group the opportunity to regularly assess next steps and, when appropriate, offer paths of inquiry that address the concerns that are emerging in the conversation.

And one of the most important functions of Restating is that it gives the group a break from discussing. Although it is only momentary, when the Facilitator restates what has been said, she is asking the group to stop thinking and talking, and to listen for accuracy, and to hold her accountable for the correct tracking of the discussion.

Restating – Part 1

When you are Restating, you are trying to accomplish three basic tasks:

- Identify the underlying concern or conflict in what is being said;
- Assure the person whose statements you are restating that you have heard what s/he has said, not that you agree;
- and Simplify the content and ask if its accurate. This helps both the speaker and the group digest what has been said.

When Restating, I find it helpful to use this simple framework: “What I hear you saying is...[insert the simplified content highlighting the underlying concern], is that right?” By simply asking if you got it right, you are offering the opportunity for the group or speaker to further clarify the key points of the discussion, which is always helpful.

Here is a useful example. Say a participant in your meeting says something along the lines of: “I hate these meetings. People speak just to hear themselves talk. We never get anything done, and I don't have time to sit around just talking about stuff. We have real problems that need solving.”

What is happening here? The participant speaker is feeling frustrated and impatient, but is also feeling a deep sense of passion and responsibility towards the essential work of the group. The facilitator can

recognize the frustration and impatience as a consequence of the passion and responsibility having no outlet in the stalled process. The facilitator might then say: “What I hear you saying is that you are passionate about this work and feel a responsibility to be addressing issues more directly, and that our process is frustrating for you because the content is not action-oriented. Is that right?”

The speaker knows that his or her true feelings are accounted for, the group can more easily digest the information because it is not stated in an attacking way, and the Facilitator can more assess an appropriate next step.

Restating – Part 2

In some cases, the facilitator may want to offer a new path of inquiry for moving the conversation forward, or an alternative process by which to resolve a concern. Some useful things to think about...

→ It is helpful to offer a Path or Process when:

- the group is at a point of decision, but is feeling stuck;
- the group needs to discuss multiple offerings or proposals on the table that require separate conversations and evaluative processes;
- there is general confusion in the group, or a lack of awareness about alternatives and options.

→ You can base the path or process you offer in:

- content that has already been articulated;
- an evaluation of alternatives as articulated by the group;
- asking for more alternatives or options. In other words “throw it back to the group.”

Take the example from Part I. If the facilitator, after checking with the speaker for assurance that the restatement was correct, feels that a new path or alternative process would be useful, she might say: “Why don't we brainstorm a few ideas for how we can take action on these issues, and then break into small groups and develop action plans?” This alternative process continues the conversation, and includes all participants in generating solutions while directly addressing the concern of the participant who spoke out in the first place.

There are times when the Facilitator must take great care in offering a new path of inquiry or alternative process. One of those times is when the current exercise or activity is moving well and working for the group, but one or two people are articulating that they feel challenged by it. Often, as facilitators, we pick activities with the intention of challenging the group, but feel uncertain as to what to do when confronted with the reality of individual responses. When I am facilitating, I sometimes hear a participant say, “I don't like this activity” or “I disagree with this framework.” If I have taken steps to be sure the participant clearly understands the activity, my response is, “It's OK. This is supposed to be challenging.” Then I give the participant the opportunity to share his or her feedback after the activity is over. More often than not, I find that the individual simply needed affirmation that the difficulty he or she was experiencing is normal.

Another time to take great care in offering a path or process is if one person in the group is experiencing an acute sensation or crisis moment, arising out of the way the activity has stimulated him or her. I am wary of offering paths or processes in these circumstances for two reasons:

- 1) The individual may just be having difficulty in the activity, which is normal, but expressing it in a way that appears to be abnormal;
- 2) The individual may be feeling attacked, either by the group or by the content of the activity, which would make him or her feel less open to solution-based feedback. This is especially true when the activity is directly addressing issues of rank or privilege.

In these situations, I recommend you or your co-facilitator pull the individual aside and ask him or her what is needed in that moment. You can also invite the individual to step back from the activity and be a witness instead of a participant, until the person feels ready to step back in. The broader point here is that as Facilitator, you must be careful not to assume that you understand why a participant is having difficulty. The framework offered in Part I - "What I hear you saying is...[simplified content highlighting the underlying concern], is that right?" - is a way of accomplishing that necessary first step, which is checking in with the speaker about what you think she or he is saying and experiencing.

When Restating is done effectively, it is incredibly empowering for the Facilitator AND for the group. Restating highlights that any group process is a learning process, and that in order to learn deeply, we must listen deeply and reflect deeply.

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