

# Group Facilitation Skills for Student Leaders

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## Why do Student Leaders Need to Learn Group Facilitation Skills?

Leadership is the process of assisting a group to realize its common goals, visions, and dreams. Effective leaders capitalize on the talents and diverse ideas of the group members to formulate and achieve these goals. Leadership involves encouraging a group to develop and grow by creating opportunities for group members to learn from one another through common experiences. In order to accomplish all of this, a leader needs to possess strong group facilitation skills. Group facilitation skills are the things that a leader says or does to promote experiential learning within a group. These skills will enable a leader to guide a group through the complex stages of group development, creating a cohesive team that learns from experience.

## What Kinds of Student Leaders Use Group Facilitation Skills?

As a university student leader, you will be called on to use your facilitation skills in a variety of settings such as a resident advisor conducting a hall meeting, an orientation leader guiding a campus tour, a peer educator presenting a health education workshop, or an officer of a student organization planning an event. Whatever your role as a student leader, strong facilitation skills will enable you to foster positive group interaction and individual learning. The examples of facilitation skills described later will draw upon the experience of five types of student leaders:

- **Peer Mentors** who work in orientation, learning communities, or advising
- **Peer Educators** who present on health, academic, or personal growth topics
- **Student Government Leaders** who serve on representative bodies or advisory boards
- **Club & Organization Leaders** who are involved in social, cultural / ethnic, political, religious, fraternity / sorority, service, or sports / recreation groups for students
- **Resident Advisors** and other student leaders who work in residential programs

## Where do Student Leaders Use Group Facilitation Skills?

The facilitation skills outlined here can be applied to a variety of settings in which university student leaders interact with groups. For example, student leaders frequently facilitate groups in the following four settings:

- **Meetings** - student government, hall meetings, student groups, staff meetings, etc.
- **Presentations** - academic skills, health education, advising, student government, etc.

- **Discussion Groups** - learning communities, residential life, student groups, etc.
- **Work Teams** - planning committees, task force groups, group assignments in classes, etc.
- **Informal Groups** - hanging out, eating lunch, campus tours, campus activities, etc.

## Experiential Learning

David Kolb (1984) described a model of experiential learning that provides a useful way to think about leadership and group facilitation. Kolb described four ways that people learn which he referred to as concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. He arranged these four learning modes in a circle and suggested that effective learning involves completing this experiential learning cycle. We encourage you to think of promoting experiential learning as an essential aspect of your role as a student leader.

## Individual Learning Styles

Kolb also used these learning modes as anchors on two perpendicular axes to identify four individual learning styles. McCarthy (1990) applied this model to education and referred to these learning styles as imaginative, analytic, common sense and dynamic learners. As a student leader, it is important to realize that different group members will have different learning styles which will impact the way they behave in a group. To be an effective group leader, you should be aware of these four learning styles and learn to use skills that will meet the needs of all group members.

**Imaginative Learners** are oriented toward concrete experience and reflective observation. They have strengths in imaginative ability and awareness of meaning and values. Imaginative learners learn best when they are given the opportunity for personal involvement and interpersonal interaction.

**Analytic Learners** are oriented toward abstract conceptualization and reflective observation. They have strengths in inductive reasoning and creating theoretical models. Analytic learners like to learn about theories, facts, concepts, and data and often excel in traditional educational settings.

**Common Sense Learners** are oriented toward abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. They have strengths in problem solving and decision making. They want to put learning to immediate practical use. Common Sense learners want to be involved in hands-on learning that involves experimenting with new knowledge.

**Dynamic Learners** are oriented toward concrete experience and active experimentation. They have strengths related to carrying out plans, taking action, and getting involved with new experiences. Dynamic learners may be anxious to know how to apply new learning and will want to put ideas into action.

## Facilitation Skills

Brooks-Harris and Stock-Ward (in press) used Kolb's model of experiential learning and individual learning styles to identify four types of facilitation skills. They are referred to here as engaging,

informing, involving, and planning skills. Engaging skills correspond to imaginative learning, informing skills promote analytic learning, involving skills match common sense learning, and planning skills correspond to dynamic learning. We have adapted Brooks-Harris and Stock-Ward's model specifically to student leadership in order to identify 20 facilitation skills for you to learn, practice, and use in your groups. An effective group leader should develop all four types of facilitation skills.

## What are Attending Skills?

Attending skills are communication skills that form a foundation for group facilitation. Attending involves active listening skills that can help you make contact with another person and hear how they understand the world (Ivey, Gluckstern, & Ivey, 1993). These skills were originally identified to train individual counselors but they also are essential to group facilitation. As a student leader, it is important to develop strong attending skills to communicate with both individuals and groups. These skills are used to support all four types of group learning: engaging, informing, involving, and planning. Ivey, Gluckstern, and Ivey (1993) identified five types of basic attending skills:

**Active Listening with Attending Behaviors** - Active listening involves verbal and nonverbal behaviors that demonstrate you are listening and encourages another person to talk more freely. Attending behaviors include **appropriate eye contact, attentive body language,** and using a **vocal style that indicates interest.**

**Open Invitation to Talk** - By asking open questions, you can encourage someone to talk more freely. An open question is one that allows the other person to elaborate on information of their choice. In contrast, a closed question emphasizes content and can often be answered in a few words or with a yes or no. Open questions are preferred because they allow you to follow the lead of the person to whom you are listening. For example, "Can you tell me more about the conflict with your roommate?"

**Encouraging and Paraphrasing** - You can clarify what someone is saying by using a verbal minimal encourage such as "Uh-huh," "Really?," or "Tell me more." You can also clarify by paraphrasing what someone says in order to let them know that they have been heard. For example, "Mandy, you're disappointed because we didn't get to finish the discussion, is that right?"

**Reflecting Feelings** - It is often helpful to identify emotions that are expressed indirectly. This involves focusing more on the feeling than the content. For example, "It seems like you're really angry that this program was canceled." Key emotions include happiness, sadness, anger, and fear.

**Summarization** - The purpose of summarization is to help another individual integrate behavior, thoughts, and feelings. For example, "After you turned in the petition and it was rejected, you thought you were treated unfairly and you're afraid that you won't get another chance. Is that what you said?"

## How Do Group Facilitation Skills Differ from Attending Skills?

Group facilitation skills go one step further than attending skills. Attending skills are used to ensure a good connection between a listener and a speaker. Group facilitation skills are designed to create a sense of connection within an entire group and between group members as well as with the leader. You will use attending skills in all four types of group facilitation but you will be taking an extra step to focus on the whole group and not just the individuals within the group.

### References

Brooks-Harris, J. E., & Stock-Ward, S. R. (in press). Workshops: Designing and facilitating experiential learning. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

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Kolb, D. A. (1984). Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

McCarthy, B. (1990, October). Using the 4MAT system to bring learning styles to school. Educational Leadership, 31-37.

## Four Types of Group Facilitation Skills for College Student Leaders

Being an effective group leader involves using skills that allow you to influence the way a group interacts and learns. These skills are collectively referred to as “Group Facilitation Skills.” In order to develop these skills, you will need to identify, learn, and practice a wide variety of specific behaviors that promote positive group interactions. This page will describe four types of facilitation skills that promote different types of experiential learning. The model represented here assumes that **an effective group leader has facilitation skills appropriate for promoting different types of interactive learning**. These skills were originally identified and described in the book, Workshops: Designing and facilitating experiential learning by J. E. Brooks-Harris & S. R. Stock-Ward (in press). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

**Engaging Facilitation Skills** invite members to be a part of a group. They encourage a member to feel included and valued within the group context. These skills help individuals make the transition from their past experiences into a new context. They help group members reflect on what they already know and prepare them for interactive learning. Engaging skills are used to create curiosity, interest and energy. They encourage the discovery of personal meaning and interpersonal connections.

**Informing Facilitation Skills** are used to provide a group with information from outside the group and to help the group learn about itself. These skills include teaching factual information and allowing group members to gain new knowledge. Two types of information are relevant to a group learning format; first, content information from outside the group and, second, process information from within the group itself.

**Involving Facilitation Skills** encourage positive interaction and learning between group members. These skills create an opportunity for active experimentation and encourage learning by practice and allow group members to put new knowledge to practical use. Because involvement occurs when group members themselves practice and gain hands-on experience, these facilitation skills require a shift in focus away from the leader and toward the group and the members within the group.

**Planning Facilitation Skills** focus on planning for the future and applying learning from the group to other contexts. These skills encourage members to work together to make specific plans to accomplish group or individual goals. Planning skills prepare group members to move from active experimentation within the group to concrete experience beyond the group.

## Twenty Group Facilitation Skills for Student Leaders

### ENGAGING FACILITATION SKILLS

**Demonstrating Leadership** - letting the group know who's in charge

**Creating an Open Environment** - inviting people to be a part of the group

**Encouraging Connections** - helping people get acquainted and connected

**Building Group Rapport** - facilitating a sense of teamwork and unity

**Defining Group Identity** - establishing the group purpose and personality

### INFORMING FACILITATION SKILLS

**Providing Information** - presenting facts, resources, knowledge, theories, or data

**Soliciting Information** - asking questions, surveying ideas, or gathering data

**Clarifying Ideas or Concepts** - making sure everyone is on the same wavelength

**Conceptualizing** - using new knowledge to better understand the group

**Learning from Within the Group** - gathering information about the group itself

### INVOLVING FACILITATION SKILLS

**Inviting Participation and Interaction** - prompting action, contact, and dialogue

**Bouncing Back to the Group** - shifting focus away from the leader

**Recognizing Commonalities & Promoting Consensus** - finding common ground

**Supporting Cooperation & Group Cohesion** - fostering group unity

**Experimenting with New Behavior** - encouraging members to try new things

### PLANNING FACILITATION SKILLS

**Brainstorming** - identifying multiple possibilities

**Generalizing** - taking experience from one area and trying it in another

**Strategizing** - determining the best way to approach an issue

**Applying** - putting knowledge into action or taking learning with you

**Making Specific Plans** - creating an action plan

## Examples of Engaging Facilitation Skills

### Demonstrating Leadership

This skill identifies you as the leader and let's group members know that you'll provide guidance, support, and structure for the group. Example: "Hey everybody, I'd like your attention! I'm Jordan and I'm going to be your orientation leader for the next two days." (Peer Mentor)

### Creating an Open Environment

There are things you can do as a leader to welcome new members to the group and make them feel included. Example: "I'm really glad that each of you are going to be living on the 9th floor of Aloha Tower this year. I think we're going to have a great time together. I'd like to go around the group and have everyone share one thing they're looking forward to at UH this year." (Resident Advisor)

### Encouraging Connections

In order to feel connected to a group, members need to get to know one another and see what they have in common. Example: "I'd like each of the representatives here to introduce themselves and say a few things about the group they represent and what other groups here they interact with the most." (Student Government)

### Building Group Rapport

One of the challenges of group leadership is creating camaraderie and good will within the group. It is important to encourage positive interactions that make members feel good about being part of the group. Example: "Thanks for coming to this time management workshop. Since I'm sure we all procrastinate, I'd like each of us to share one thing that we do to waste time when we're avoiding something more important." (Peer Educator)

### Defining Group Identity

Every group has an identity and an atmosphere. As a leader, you will set the tone for defining what the group is all about and what it will feel like to be a member. Example: "Let me tell you about what the kayak club has been like and what we've done in the past and then we can talk about whether we want to do the same things this year." (Club / Organization)

## Engaging Facilitation Skills Worksheet

For each of the following skills, please think about your role as a student leader and write down an example of something you could say or do that demonstrates this skill.

Demonstrating Leadership - letting the group know who's in charge

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Creating an Open Environment - inviting people to be a part of the group

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Encouraging Connections - helping people get acquainted and connected

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Building Group Rapport - facilitating a sense of teamwork and unity

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Defining Group Identity - establishing the group purpose and personality

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## Examples of Informing Facilitation Skills

### Providing Information

Leadership often involves providing the group with pertinent information that they don't already have. This information might include facts, resources, knowledge, theories, or data. A lecture is one of many ways to provide information. Example: "There are several resources on campus that can help support our group activities. Let me tell you about some of them..." (Club / Organization)

### Soliciting Information

A leader often needs to collect information from the group members. This can be done by asking open ended questions, surveying ideas, or gathering data. Example: "What kinds of things have you done to effectively manage your stress in the past? Can I have two or three people share what has worked for them?" (Peer Mentor)

### Clarifying Ideas or Concepts

This skill involves making sure everyone understands what is being said or agreed upon. One way to clarify is to summarize the concept or idea and see if there are any misunderstandings. Example: "Let me make sure that I am clear on this. We would like to have quiet hours from 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. and then from 10:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. Is that what we're all agreeing on?" (Resident Advisor)

### Conceptualizing

Being a leader sometimes involves using new or outside knowledge to help the group better understand itself. Looking at the group using a particular theory, model, or concept is one example of conceptualizing. Example: "In my leadership class, I just learned about three styles of leadership. In our group, I think there is a conflict between those who favor an authoritarian style and those who prefer laissez-faire leadership." (Student Government)

### Learning from Within the Group

In addition to providing information from outside the group, you can survey group members or gather information about the group itself. You might also use your observation skills to identify group characteristics, themes, or process. Example: "In addition to the examples of study skills from the book, I'd like for us to identify our own skills. Let's go around the group and have each person identify one good study habit and one bad study habit they need to change." (Peer Educator)

## Informing Facilitation Skills Worksheet

For each of the following skills, please think about your role as a student leader and write down an example of something you could say or do that demonstrates this skill.

**Providing Information** - presenting facts, resources, knowledge, theories, or data

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**Soliciting Information** - asking questions, surveying ideas, or gathering data

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**Clarifying Ideas or Concepts** - making sure everyone is on the same wavelength

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**Conceptualizing** - using new knowledge to better understand the group

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**Learning from Within the Group** - identifying characteristics, themes, or process

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## Examples of Involving Facilitation Skills

### Inviting Participation and Interaction

Leadership often involves prompting group members to take action or to interact with one another. This interaction can occur within the present group or in the future. Example: “Let's break down into small groups so that everyone can share their ideas about how to better promote spiritual growth on campus.” (Club / Organization)

### Bouncing Back to the Group

The group's attention may naturally gravitate toward you as the leader. However, it is often helpful for you to deflect this attention and “bounce” the focus or energy back to the group itself to keep interaction and involvement high. Example: “That's a really good question. What have other people's experiences been in this situation?” (Peer Mentor)

### Recognizing Commonalities and Promoting Consensus

Promoting involvement often involves helping group members find similarities in ideas, interests, values, and plans. Conflicts often arise when the group focuses on differences rather than common ground. Identifying similarities can be used to support common goals. Example: “It sounds like you have different ideas about how clean you need your room to be but you both agree that you want to work this out and maintain a friendship. After hearing from both of you, let's agree on some minimum standards that would be mutually agreeable.” (Resident Advisor)

### Supporting Cooperation and Group Cohesion

As the identity of the group continues to form and strengthen, a key leadership skill is to encourage supportive interactions and nurture the ongoing interdependence of the members so that they feel like they can accomplish more as a group than individually. Example: “As we continue to lobby against tuition raises, it is important that we show a united front. We need to make sure that we are supporting each other and communicating the same message. How should we present our collective point of view?” (Student Government)

### Experimenting with New Behavior

Group learning often involves encouraging members to try new things. Experimenting can include role plays, work sheets, or other exercises as well as simply suggesting alternate behaviors for members to try. Example: “Now that we've talked about different ways to meet people on campus, I'd like to do some role plays. Who would like to practice some of these skills?” (Peer Educator)

## Involving Facilitation Skills Worksheet

For each of the following skills, please think about your role as a student leader and write down an example of something you could say or do that demonstrates this skill.

**Inviting Participation and Interaction** - prompting action, contact, and dialogue

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**Bouncing Back to the Group** - shifting focus away from the leader

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**Recognizing Commonalities & Promoting Consensus** - finding common ground

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**Supporting Cooperation & Group Cohesion** - fostering group unity

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**Experimenting with New Behavior** - encouraging members to try new things

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## Examples of Planning Facilitation Skills

### Brainstorming

One of the best ways for a group to start the planning process is by generating lots of ideas in a nonevaluative manner. Brainstorming allows a group to think of a diverse and large number of ideas in a short period of time without rejecting ideas too quickly. Example: “We need to think of some possible fund-raisers for the Spring semester. Let's shout out as many different ideas as possible without criticizing the ideas. We can go back and evaluate how realistic each idea is later.” (Club / Organization)

### Generalizing

This skill involves taking a successful behavior from one area and trying it in a new area. Example: “Now that we've all identified strategies that we used to achieve important goals in the past, let's see which of these strategies will help you achieve academic success here at UH.” (Peer Mentor)

### Strategizing

After analyzing a problem and brainstorming possible solutions, it is important to make a decision about the best way to solve a problem or approach a challenge. Example: “It seems like there is too much underage drinking in our halls because there aren't any fun alternatives to alcohol on the weekend. Let's think about other things students like to do and see what we can plan.” (Resident Advisor)

### Applying

Once knowledge has been shared in a group, it should be put into action in a way that directly relates to the experience of the group. In this way, group members can take new learning home with them. Example: “Now that we've talked about the importance of verbally communicating about sex in order to prevent negative consequences like STDs and coercion, I'd like each of you to write down some things a student could actually say to a dating partner to bring up these topics... Does anyone want to share what they've written?” (Peer Educator)

### Making Specific Plans

Creating an action plan with specific steps, a time-line, and designation of who is going to take the lead on each section is a crucial skill in helping a group realize its goals. Example: “Now that we have passed legislation to spend money on improving library services, what specific steps are we going to take to accomplish this goal? Let's write them on the board and then assign leaders and a time-line.” (Student Government.)

## Planning Facilitation Skills Worksheet

For each of the following skills, please think about your role as a student leader and write down an example of something you could say or do that demonstrates this skill.

**Brainstorming** - identifying multiple possibilities

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**Generalizing** - taking experience from one area and trying it in another

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**Strategizing** - determining the best way to approach an issue

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**Applying** - putting knowledge into action or taking learning with you

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**Making Specific Plans** - creating an action plan

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## Leadership Techniques that Support Group Facilitation

**Checking-In / Round Robin** - To ensure complete participation, it may be helpful to go around the group and have each member take a turn sharing. (Supports all four facilitation skills)

**Writing** - Writing can be used as a way for members to privately organize their thoughts before sharing with the larger group. One way to do this is by handing out index cards and having members record their thoughts. (Supports all four facilitation skills)

**Using Humor** - To build group rapport, you may want to use some moderate and appropriate humor. Humor should be used to create safety and not alienate or offend people in the group. (Engaging)

**Self-Disclosing** - At times, it is appropriate to share your own experience as an example or model. Self disclosure can also be used to build rapport with the group by highlighting your similarity to group members. (Engaging / Informing)

**Surveying / Voting** - One way to gather information about a group is to survey all the members or to have them vote on a particular issue or idea. (Informing)

**Modeling** - Demonstrating skills and/or behavior is an active way of providing information to a group that prepares them for practice or other forms of involvement. (Informing / Involving)

**Sharing in Pairs / Small Groups** - Breaking the group into pairs or small groups allows all members to share their ideas in a less-threatening environment. After sharing in a small group, some members may find it more comfortable to share their ideas with the large group. Common themes can then be identified in an open discussion. (Involving)

**Critiquing / Giving Feedback** - One way to involve group members is to ask them to give feedback or to critique what you or others have said or done. It is important to encourage the group to start with strengths or positive feedback before suggesting areas for improvement. (Involving)

**Role Playing** - A great way to encourage new behavior is to ask group members to actually act out what they would do or say in a particular situation. Other group members can play other roles to flesh out the situation. (Involving / Planning)

## Strategies for Improving Your Facilitation Skills

**Identify Your Own Learning Style** - Complete Kolb's Learning Style Inventory to assess your learning preferences. Your leadership style may emphasize your preferences and overlook the needs of other styles.

**Consider the Diversity of Learning Styles in Your Group** - Remember that people in your group probably have a range of learning styles. This will help you adapt various approaches to facilitation that meet diverse learning needs.

**Reflect on Your Strengths and Weaknesses** - Review the list of 20 facilitation skills and make note of those that you consider personal strengths and those that need the most improvement.

**Target Specific Skills for Practice** - Look over the skills you have identified for improvement or addition and decide which skills you should work on first. It is best to target no more than two or three at a time.

**Practice Skills in a Safe Environment** - Identify a safe place, such as a leadership class, where it is okay to make mistakes and experiment with new techniques. This is the ideal way to start practicing new skills.

**Identify Opportunities in Your Group to Improve or Try New Skills** - Seek out diverse opportunities to practice facilitation in your group. Volunteer to facilitate a portion of your next meeting or give a presentation. Look for opportunities to practice facilitation skills in informal interactions with group members as well.

**Ask Someone to Observe and Give You Feedback** - Ask another leader to observe your facilitation skills and give you constructive feedback on what you did well and what you can improve.

**Observe Other Leaders** - Watch other leaders facilitate a group to discover ways to enhance your own skills. Use the Group Facilitation Skills Checklist to keep track of the skills you observe.

**Videotape Yourself and Evaluate Your Skill Usage** - Observe yourself on videotape to assess and improve your leadership.



## Action Plan for Improving Your Facilitation Skills

1. I would like to increase my usage of Engaging Skills in the following ways / areas:

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2. In particular, I would like to practice using the following Engaging Skills:

a. \_\_\_\_\_ b. \_\_\_\_\_

3. I would like to increase my usage of Informing Skills in the following ways / areas:

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4. In particular, I would like to practice using the following Informing Skills:

a. \_\_\_\_\_ b. \_\_\_\_\_

5. I would like to increase my usage of Involving Skills in the following ways / areas:

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6. In particular, I would like to practice using the following Involving Skills:

a. \_\_\_\_\_ b. \_\_\_\_\_

7. I would like to increase my usage of Planning Skills in the following ways / areas:

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8. In particular, I would like to practice using the following Planning Skills:

a. \_\_\_\_\_ b. \_\_\_\_\_

9. Overall, the type of facilitation skills that I am probably least comfortable with and need the most practice with is probably (circle one):

a. Engaging - - - b. Informing - - - c. Involving - - - d. Planning

## Group Facilitation Skills Check-up

For each of the following groups of skills and individual skills, please rate yourself on the following scale:

A - I'm using this skill with comfort and success

B - I'm using this skill but not as smoothly as I would like

C - I'm not using this skill as much as I would like

### ENGAGING FACILITATION SKILLS

\_\_\_\_\_ **Demonstrating Leadership** - letting the group know who's in charge

\_\_\_\_\_ **Creating an Open Environment** - inviting people to be a part of the group

\_\_\_\_\_ **Encouraging Connections** - helping people get acquainted and connected

\_\_\_\_\_ **Building Group Rapport** - facilitating a sense of teamwork and unity

\_\_\_\_\_ **Defining Group Identity** - establishing the group purpose and personality

### INFORMING FACILITATION SKILLS

\_\_\_\_\_ **Providing Information** - presenting facts, resources, knowledge, theories, or data

\_\_\_\_\_ **Soliciting Information** - asking questions, surveying ideas, or gathering data

\_\_\_\_\_ **Clarifying Ideas or Concepts** - making sure everyone is on the same wavelength

\_\_\_\_\_ **Conceptualizing** - using new knowledge to better understand the group

\_\_\_\_\_ **Learning from Within the Group** - gathering information about the group itself

### INVOLVING FACILITATION SKILLS

\_\_\_\_\_ **Inviting Participation and Interaction** - prompting action, contact, and dialogue

\_\_\_\_\_ **Bouncing Back to the Group** - shifting focus away from the leader

\_\_\_\_\_ **Recognizing Commonalities & Promoting Consensus** - finding common ground

\_\_\_\_\_ **Supporting Cooperation & Group Cohesion** - fostering group unity

\_\_\_\_\_ **Experimenting with New Behavior** - encouraging members to try new things

### PLANNING FACILITATION SKILLS

\_\_\_\_\_ **Brainstorming** - identifying multiple possibilities

\_\_\_\_\_ **Generalizing** - taking experience from one area and trying it in another

\_\_\_\_\_ **Strategizing** - determining the best way to approach an issue

\_\_\_\_\_ **Applying** - putting knowledge into action or taking learning with you

\_\_\_\_\_ **Making Specific Plans** - creating an action plan