

# A Cheat-Sheet for Cafe Society Facilitators

A thoughtful and engaged facilitator can make a world of difference for your conversation. An effective facilitator strives to unlock the wisdom in the room by setting a welcoming and open tone that urges everyone to participate.

**You don't have to be an expert to host Cafe Society. Follow these useful tips to help guide your discussion.**



Photo credit: Dave Marques



**Introduce yourself as the facilitator.** Let people know that your role is to keep the conversation going and to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to participate. You'll pose questions to the group to kick off the conversation. You'll keep track of who wants to speak and call on them. And, you'll urge everyone to chime in.

**Consensus is not the goal.** The discussion does not need to end in agreement or with everyone on the same page. It is productive to see how varying viewpoints can coexist. Allow the group to examine the roots of an opposing or unpopular stance.

**Make sure everyone has a chance to participate.** Don't let anyone (including yourself) dominate the discussion. On the other hand, don't be afraid of silence. If there's a brief pause in the conversation, that's okay.

## Open up the discussion by sharing these guidelines:

- Speak with the expectation that you will be heard. Listen with the expectation that you will learn something new.
- Listen actively. Listening is not simply waiting for your turn to speak.
- Disagree without being disagreeable.

**Stay on topic.** Reference articles or supplemental materials as a way of bringing the conversation back to the topic if the discussion goes astray.

**To begin a discussion, ask a thought-provoking question.** Conduct a round-robin, allowing each person to share his or her initial thoughts. Once everyone gets a chance to be heard, the conversation can open up to a natural dialogue. You can also read a paragraph from an article or news story as a preface to your question.

**Be mindful of your role as the facilitator.** Your role is not to lecture or to be an expert. You're there to create a welcoming, comfortable forum for people to freely exchange ideas. You shouldn't feel the need to respond to every comment or know the answer to every question that gets asked. Encourage participants to direct their comments to everyone.





## Troubleshooting

**IF** some participants are talking a lot and others aren't talking at all, ask if anyone who hasn't had a chance to speak would like to offer their thoughts.

**IF** someone is dominating the discussion, you can ask participants to limit their points to three minutes or less and let them know if they go beyond three minutes.

**IF** everyone agrees, you can play devil's advocate and raise a different point of view.

**IF** no one is talking, ask an open-ended question. It can be as simple as what interests you about this topic or what brought you to this discussion?

**IF** the tone of the conversation gets uncomfortably tense, you should say so in an even-handed way. Make sure you remain calm and ask participants to consider why this issue is so controversial or evokes heated responses.

## Useful prompts to keep the conversation going:

- What do you mean by that? Was there a particular resource that gave you that idea?
- Does anyone agree or disagree with what was said?
- Can you tell us more about that? If "X" is true, then what about "Y"?
- Have you heard something that stirred fresh thoughts or feelings?
- Has an interesting theme or idea emerged that you would like to add to?

