



Co-Lab Facilitator Guide



Check-ins



You'll start each of your Co-Lab sessions with a check-in that asks participants to share how they're doing personally and in their role as a CASA volunteer.

Here are the questions participants will answer in their check-in:

- In one or two words, how are you feeling right now personally?
- In one or two words, how are you feeling right now as a CASA volunteer?

Why start sessions with a check-in?

The main reason for starting sessions with a check-in is so that you and your participants can gain information about one another. You'll learn how people are feeling personally and professionally, which tells you what you can expect from and how you can support participants. This information is invaluable and should be used to inform how you run the rest of the meeting. It will also affect how participants choose to engage with one another throughout the session.

Starting your session with a check-in also sets the expectation immediately that participants will need to speak and engage. The check-in draws participants into the meeting by making them talk right away, which increases the chances that they'll actively participate throughout the meeting.

When you check-in during the first meeting, participants also have the opportunity to get to know one another. Although many of our participants may already know each other by name, not everyone will. The check-in is people's first chance to get to know one another by name.

Facilitator Responsibilities and Best Practices

The following pages list the most important responsibilities you have as a facilitator and the best practices you can use to meet those responsibilities.

Some of these responsibilities and best practices will come naturally to you and others will take more work. The best way to practice these skills is to put them to work in your sessions and reflect on how they went and what you might do the same or differently next time.

Give the Work to the Group

You, as the facilitator, are not responsible for having all the answer or for solving all the group's problems. In fact, it's important for you to step back and let the group do the work themselves, even if you do have all the answers. As the facilitator, your job is to create a space where participants can collaborate to answer their own questions, solve their own problems, and do the work for themselves.

Why is it important to allow the group to do the work?

REASON #1

We're trained, often from a young age, to listen to the powerful person in the front of the room. If you make yourself the powerful person in the front of the room, everyone will sit and listen to you. They'll default to whatever you say, rather than sharing their own ideas and having discussions with their peers. That robs participants of the opportunity to build collaboration and problem-solving skills that will make them better CASA volunteers.

REASON #2

Even if you do have great answers and solutions, everyone enters the room with different approaches, experiences, and perspectives. Everyone has a unique contribution to make, but they won't have the opportunity to make those contributions if the facilitator immediately gives their answers and solutions.

REASON #3

Participants will feel more ownership of ideas and solutions that they have come up with themselves. They will be less resistant and more eager to try out those solutions.

REASON #4

Ultimately, we want CASA volunteers to improve their ability to think critically, solve problems creatively, and collaborate effectively. If they are given answers and solutions, they won't have the opportunity to develop those skills.

REASON #5

As the facilitator, it's your job to navigate the group through the meeting. You need to be focused on the big picture goals of the meeting. Is the group getting where it needs to go? Are the group dynamics going well? If you're spending all your time answering questions and giving solutions, you're going to lose track of the big picture, and you won't be able to lead the group toward their goals.

Give the Work to the Group

The skill of giving the work back to the group is often challenging for facilitators. It's natural to want to answer a question that is asked of you or share a solution as soon as it pops into your mind. It takes conscious effort to step back and give the group the space to do the work themselves.

Strategies to help you give the work to the group:



Ask Effective Questions

Your most powerful tool as a facilitator is the question you ask. The right questions can excite and engage participants, while the wrong questions can shut down a conversation. Ask participants questions that are open-ended and inquisitive. Ask questions that make participants think more deeply about the topic being discussed.

For example:

If someone suggests a possible solution to a challenge you're discussing you could ask:

Do you all think that's a good solution to try?

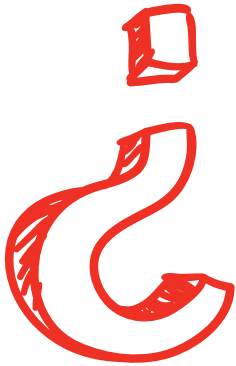
You'll likely get some nods but little conversation in response to that question. A more effective question might be:

What do you all think are some possible benefits and pitfalls of the solution that was just offered?

This question can't be answered with a nod or a simple "yes" or "no." This question is open-ended and requires participants to give more detailed and thoughtful answers than the previous question.

Give the Work to the Group

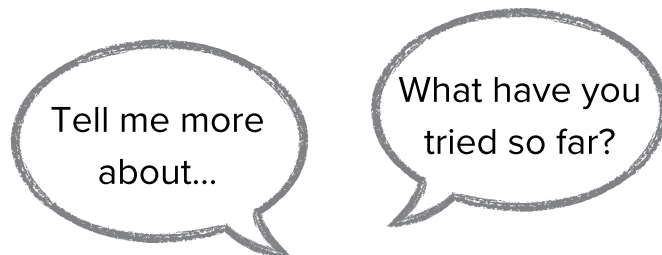
Strategies to help you give the work to the group:



Ask Clarifying Questions

Get participants to think about their challenges and experiences more deeply by asking them clarifying information about what they've shared. The goal is to get them to uncover more information and think more critically about what is happening so that more information is available for discussing that challenge.

When you're asked a question, here are some phrases you can use to turn the question around:

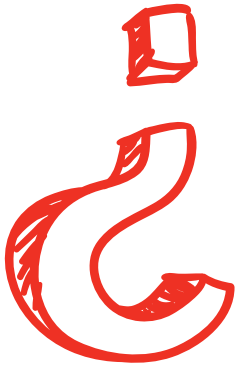


Encourage Participants to Think Through Outcomes

As participants are making suggestions and considering possible options for handling the problems on their case, ask them to think through the possible outcomes of different potential solutions. This activity will help participants determine the pros and cons of possible solutions and proactively identify possible issues that might arise when implementing this solution. By asking participants to think through the outcomes of different solutions, you're helping them build their problem solving and critical thinking skills without telling them why certain solutions might be better or worse.

Give the Work to the Group

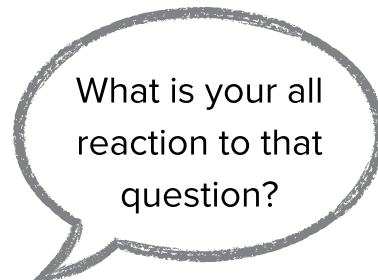
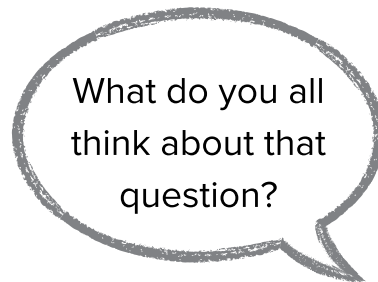
Strategies to help you give the work to the group:



Turn Questions Around

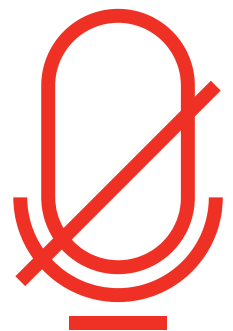
Participants will inevitably ask you direct questions, but you don't need to be the one to answer those questions. Turn the question around and pose it back to the group.

When you're asked a question, here are some phrases you can use to turn the question around:



Allow for Silence

Don't be afraid to let the group sit in silence for a while, rather than jumping in with your own thoughts. Silence shows the group that you aren't going to give them all the answers and that the expectation is for them, not you, to support one another. Silence also gives people time to think, which is particularly important for people who like to process information internally (rather than out loud).

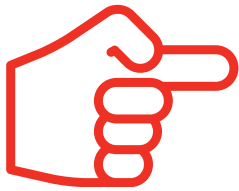


Have a specific number in mind (such as 8 or 10) and count to that number slowly in your head whenever a question is asked and there's silence. Don't allow yourself to speak until you've counted to at least that number.

Manage Group Dynamics

Everybody is unique and interacts with the world differently. You have quiet people and outspoken people. You have people who prefer to process information through independent thinking and others who want to process out loud. You have people with strong opinions and very different opinions. It is a facilitator's job to manage group dynamics so that everyone not only has the room to engage with the group but can engage on their own terms.

Strategies to help you manage group dynamics:



Call on People

Calling on people ensures you hear from everyone, but it can also cause unnecessary stress for participants. Some participants may be upset or stressed if they're called on when they're not ready to speak. Think carefully about if and when you choose to use this strategy. If you do call on people, consider what question you're asking them when you call on them. Easy, open-ended questions might help them feel less stressed about being put on the spot.

Sequence Participants

If you do want to call on people, sequencing is a great tool. Sequencing involves listing the order in which you want people to speak. It can be as simple as telling a particular person to start and then going around in a circle. Or, you can specifically list the names of who you want to speak. If you want to soften the blow of calling on people, you might ask an outspoken person to talk first and then name some quieter people to talk afterward. You're making sure the quieter people are heard while also giving them time to prepare their answer and get ready to speak.

A grey, hand-drawn style speech bubble with a tail pointing towards the bottom left. It contains the text: "Let's hear from Vanda and then Jasmine and then Courtney."

Let's hear from
Vanda and then
Jasmine and then
Courtney.

Manage Group Dynamics

Strategies to help you manage group dynamics:

Give Participants Time to Think

Some people need to reflect and think in their head before answering a question. Now and then, give the whole group a couple minutes to think and jot down ideas about a question before you begin discussing out loud. Quieter people may have an easier time contributing if they've had the time to think about their answer beforehand. Independent reflection time also gives more talkative people the opportunity to organize their ideas, helping them convey their thoughts more efficiently.

Provide Anonymous Ways to Contribute

If participants are nervous about sharing their thoughts and ideas out loud, you might give them the opportunity to share their contributions anonymously. For example, you can have everyone write down their thoughts and hand in their paper. You can then share those ideas with the group without anyone knowing who wrote them. After reading the ideas, you might ask the group, "what stood out to you about those answers?" or "what's your reaction to those ideas?" in order to turn the activity into a group discussion.

Talk with Participants Outside of the Group

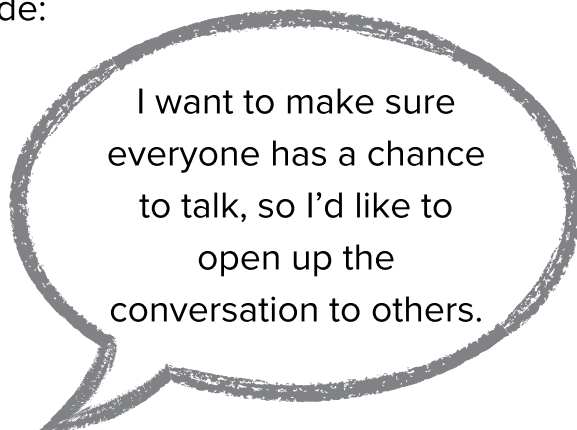
If you have participants who are either too quiet or talkative, you can talk with them before or after a session or during a break. If someone is too quiet, you might ask them what's standing in their way of contributing more and whether there's anything you can do to remove those barriers. Emphasize how everyone's input and experience is valuable to the group. If someone is too talkative, explain the impact that has on the group in terms of not leaving space for others. Work with them to brainstorm strategies to contribute without taking up too much space.

Manage Group Dynamics

Strategies to help you manage group dynamics:

Interrupt When Necessary

We're often trained that interrupting others is rude, but sometimes it's necessary as a facilitator. Interrupting helps you keep the meeting on track and ensure there's time for everyone to contribute. A good time to interrupt is when the person stops to take a breath. You might even create a codeword with a talkative person or with the whole groups that can be used to indicate when someone is talking too much. Some phrases you can use when interrupting include:



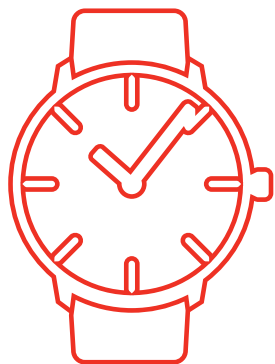
Establish a Ground Rule

When your group establishes their ground rules at their first session, you might ask the group how they want to handle situations where someone is too talkative or quiet. Give the work back to the group and allow them to decide what actions they will take and/or want you to take.

Manage Time

The group has specific goals that it's trying to accomplish, which are outlined in the agenda. As a facilitator, it's your job to make sure the group accomplishes those goals. And they'll only be able to do so if you make sure they stay on track in terms of time. It may seem rude or mean to make the group end an engaging conversation, but you're doing so in service of the group. Managing time ensures they get everything done that needs to get done.

Strategies to help you manage time:



Track Time

Make sure you have a method for keeping track of the time. You might use a watch, phone, or clock that you check regularly. You might set a timer. If you don't feel you're able to track the time yourself, you might ask someone in the group to be responsible for tracking the time and letting you know when it's time to move on to the next conversation.

Plan Time Reasonably

The session agenda we have outlines the timing for most conversation, but you'll need to make some decisions about time within those conversations. For example, you'll have to help the group decide how they want to divide the time they have to discuss each person's challenge. Make sure you're thinking about time reasonably. If your plan is unrealistic, it'll be impossible to stay on time.

Interrupt When Necessary

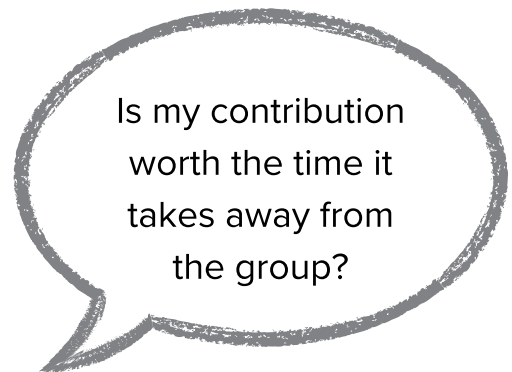
Just as interrupting is important for managing group dynamics, it's also important for managing time. You may need to interrupt more talkative people to ensure the group keeps to the allotted time. Return to the manage group dynamics section for more information on interrupting.

Manage Time

Strategies to help you manage time:

Assess your Contributions

Facilitators often want to make a lot of contributions to the conversation. You may feel pressured to contribute. You need to judge whether a contribution you want to make serves the group by moving their work forward. If it doesn't, save the story or contribution for another time.



Create a Conversation Parking Lot

When participants bring up ideas or start talking about a topic that is valuable but the group doesn't have time to discuss at the moment, put the idea in the group's Parking Lot. A Parking Lot is a list of ideas and topics that the group wants to discuss at a later date. By

putting ideas in a Parking Lot, participants will feel like their contributions are being heard while allowing the group to stay on topic and on schedule. Make sure you review that Parking Lot with your group at a later date to decide when you want to talk about those topics or whether you want to remove them from the Parking Lot.

Create the Right Atmosphere

We want these sessions to be valuable and enjoyable for people. We want people to look forward to participating and feel comradery with their group mates. In order for participants to feel this way, you, as the facilitator, need to create a comfortable atmosphere in your meetings. You need to create a safe and productive space for everyone.

Strategies to help you create the right atmosphere:

Create a Comfortable Meeting Location

Make sure you're meeting in a space that's comfortable for everyone. Consider whether the physical environment, including the furniture, lighting, and background noise, allow participants to feel safe and comfortable so they can focus. Pick a location that doesn't require too much travel for any one person or rotate locations so the same person isn't the only one with a long drive. And then bring what you need to make people feel welcome in that space. You might bring fidget toys or other items to help people focus. You might even bring baked goods, snacks, or drinks.

Acknowledge Contributions

Show gratitude by thanking participants for their contributions throughout and at the end of the meeting. You might say, "thank you for that idea you shared." At the end of the meeting, you might thank people for their hard work and engagement. When you're responding to people's contributions, though, make sure you remain neutral. Avoid saying, "that was such a good idea," or "I love that idea you just shared." While this comment may make one participant feel good, participants who don't get much of a reaction from you may feel their ideas aren't any good and stop contributing. As a facilitator, you hold a position of power in the room, so make sure you consider the impact of your words.

Create the Right Atmosphere

Strategies to help you create the right atmosphere:

Give the Work to the Group

As the facilitator, don't make yourself the center of attention or answer all the questions. Giving the work to the group helps them build camaraderie. Instead of them talking to you and looking to you for answers, they'll start engaging more with one another. This engagement will build connection, strengthen the group, and build a collaborative environment.



Listen Actively

One of the most important things that can make people feel welcome in a space like these sessions is knowing they're being heard. Listen carefully to them. Make sure your body language shows that you're listening. If you're not entirely sure you understood what the person said, you might want to ask a clarifying question or repeat what you think they said back to them and ask if you heard them correctly.



Be Open and Non-judgmental

If participants feel judged or criticized, they won't be willing to open up and share their thoughts. An open, non-judgmental attitude encourages trust and allows participants to express themselves without fear. If you observe participants being judgmental of one another, you may need to speak with the group or speak with that individuals outside of the session.

Create the Right Atmosphere

Strategies to help you create the right atmosphere:

Be Yourself

You might feel pressured to act a certain way in order to create the right atmosphere. For example, you might feel like you have to be funny, or you have to be extroverted and talkative. But there's no one right way to create the right atmosphere. If you're trying too hard to fit some model of the ideal facilitator, you'll likely come across as awkward or phony. You can just be yourself. Everyone has the ability to create a good atmosphere while still being themselves. Humor, for example, is a great way to create an enjoyable environment. But if humor doesn't come naturally to you, you might focus instead on other strategies, like listening sincerely and being supportive. You'll be a much more effective facilitator if you rely on what feels natural for you to create that atmosphere.



Use a Community Building Activity

If you have time, run a community-building activity with your group to help them become familiar with one another and build trust. You might build a quick activity into a check-in or make time for a larger activity at the beginning of a meeting.

Read the Room and Adjust

Ultimately, what happens in the room during your meetings will be unique to each of your groups and even each of your group's meetings. No matter how much you plan for the meeting or practice your facilitation skills, you're going to have to adapt in the room to what's happening. Otherwise, you'll miss opportunities for meaningful conversations and leave participants unsatisfied or uncomfortable.

Signs to look out for when reading the room:

Look for signs of whether participants are excited and engaged, confused and uncertain, or upset and uncomfortable. These signs will help you understand how participants are feeling in the moment, which will determine how you move forward with the meeting.

- Body language
- Facial expressions
- Choice of words
- Tones of voice
- Silences and pauses
- Repetition of ideas
- Emotional responses
- Questions



Read the Room and Adjust

Strategies for adjusting your next steps:

When you observe participants reacting in a certain way, you might know exactly how to react. If people are engaged and excited, you'll probably just allow them to discuss the topic as long as possible. If people seem confused, you'll likely ask what questions they have about the topic. Other times, you might notice a reaction but not know why people are reacting that way or what to do next. Here are some strategies for how to move forward in those situations.

Name what you Observe

Name out loud what you're seeing, feeling, or hearing, and ask the group if that's correct. You might say, "I feel like there's some discomfort in the room right now; are you all feeling that?" Ask questions that get the group thinking about why they're feeling that way. And then, ask what the group would like to do about what they're experiencing. Let them decide how they want to move forward.

Be Curious

Don't panic if things feel off or tense. Think of those moments as opportunities for good conversation. Be curious and ask good questions that get participants thinking more deeply about how they're feeling and why they're feeling that way. A lot of CASAs don't have the opportunity to talk about the challenging emotions this work brings up, so you might just need to create a space for them to talk with fellow CASAs.