

chapter

4

The journey of a facilitator: Holding space, fostering change

> *- **Remember you are water**. Of course you **leave salt trails**. Of course you are **crying. Flow***

- Adrienne Maree Brown
in Emergent Strategy



> *- I've learned that **people will forget what you said, people will forget** what you did**, but people will never forget** how you made them feel*

- Maya Angelou

THE WORK OF A
BRIDGING LEADER FACILITATOR

Why devote a whole chapter in this resource pack to the journey of a facilitator? We know that collaboration to address complex challenges demands reaching beyond the familiar confines of our departments, teams, levels, sectors, partners. It calls us to be open to working across levels and sectors, bridging differences and building shared purpose with people who may be different to ourselves or see things from a different perspective. The problems we are trying to address require us to co-create new possibilities that we do not necessarily know exist at the start of a process. Promising solutions may emerge from unlikely places. For example, we do not know exactly how to draw on the expertise and resources of multiple ministries and sectors to deliver integrated Early Childhood Care and Development services that cover the spectrum of nurturing care for young children across the various operating contexts in Bangladesh. The only way it may be possible for us to do this is to collaborate across the ecosystem, building the infrastructure and learning to make this work. Much of the work of a Bridging Leader is in the role of a facilitator, bringing people from different parts of the ecosystem together; Enabling conversations that cross divides and overcome barriers; Holding space for new possibilities to emerge.

In this regard, our usual coordination tools, work culture and practices may not always be fit for purpose. Our traditional formats for meeting, planning, making decisions, communicating do not always help us listen to and understand each other, and especially listening to those who have less power. Further, we may have barriers (individual or collective) that prevent us from breaking out of ingrained habits and engaging in true collaboration, even once we have made a decision to do so. Acknowledging and taking steps to overcome these barriers may make us vulnerable. But if we have the courage to stay on this journey, we could achieve real breakthroughs in collaboration. This is where **a skilled facilitator can help create and hold space for this work, sparking different kinds of relationships, and allowing for something different to emerge.**

But what kind of facilitation are we talking about? The work of facilitation that we speak about here is different to the work of a trainer, a coordinator of a process, or someone who stands in the front of a room to keep an agenda on track. The kind of facilitation we hope for here has no fixed formula or path, but it can be learned through practice. We grow into this role as we walk the path to nurture Bridging Leadership. **Our work as a Bridging Leader facilitator is to hold the space in a way that allows a group to progress toward collaboration and trust with courage and compassion, while learning together.** Essentially, this is a process of transformation, individually and as a group. This does not mean that a Bridging Leader is always running workshops. It is a way of being, of seeing, of interacting and engaging with others. The work happens sometimes in meetings, sometimes in workshops, even in phone calls or spaces of quiet reflection held with care.

As the Synergos team prepared to facilitate the Leadership for Collaboration workshops for the ICBC project, the facilitation team came together to reflect on how they understood the work of a Bridging Leader facilitator. The discussion included Andrea Rodericks, Constance Monatla, Esha Hussain, Marlene Ogawa, Morshed Khan, Rafi Chowdhury, and Rizwan Khan. The picture below capturing their responses is a useful resource. We invite you to read their reflections slowly, noting what resonates with you.



The team reflected that it sometimes takes a lot of "un-learning" to go from being a trainer or traditional meeting facilitator to this kind of emergent Bridging Leader facilitator. We share here some of their reflections:

"I am actively trying to cultivate the skill of surfacing knowing – having the patience for participants to share from their own understanding and experience… not prompting or suggesting what I think is the right answer. I try to be open to whatever needs to emerge."

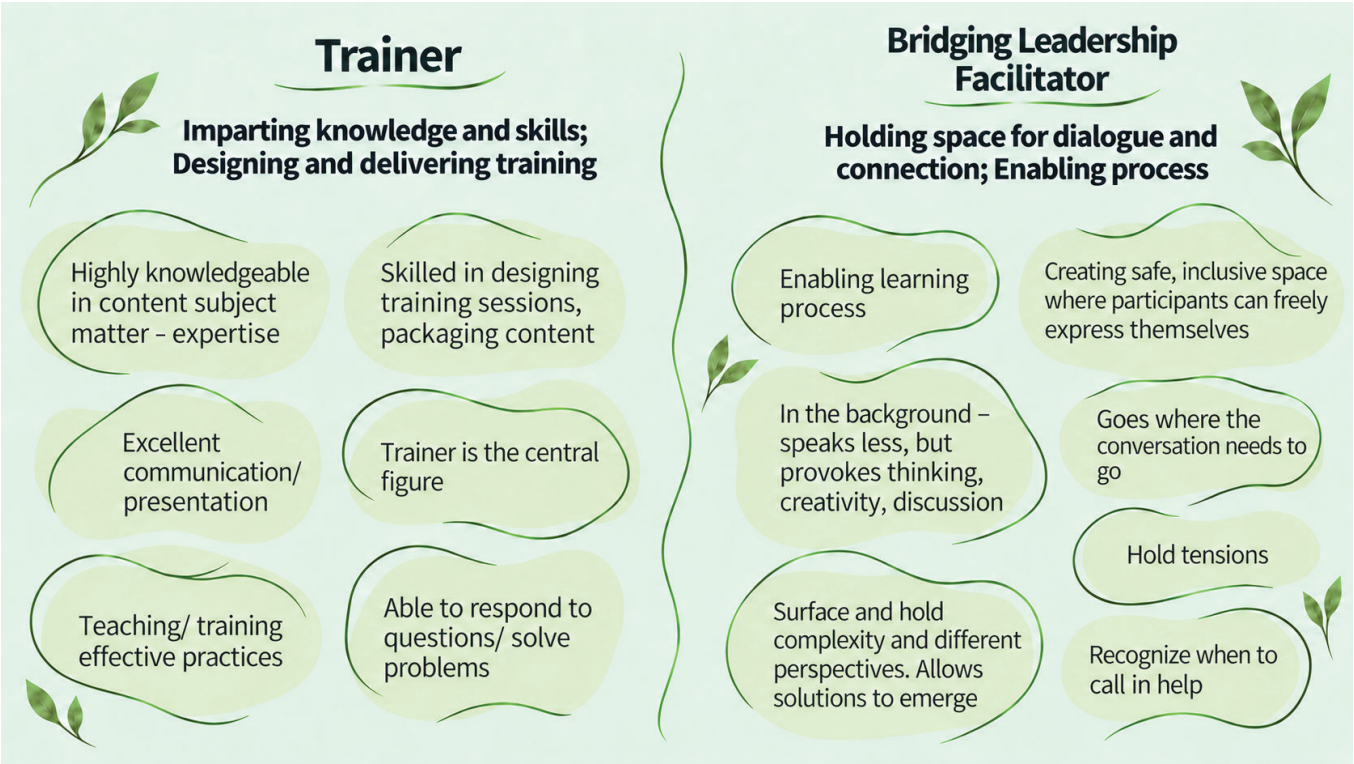
"This kind of facilitation is an invitation to model Bridging Leadership."

"You can't follow a strict predetermined facilitation plan… You plan, plan, plan and then go with the flow toward the purpose. Every group is different and will move in a different way and pace. We need to be adaptive enough to allow them to find their own path."

"In our facilitation team, I earlier had the role of the timekeeper, making sure that activities were completed in the time allocated for them. I would get so upset when things went over time. When I began facilitating, this strict focus on time would sometimes get in the way. I had to learn to honor the process. Sometimes it is important not to interrupt."

"I have learned to be OK with stillness and silence. It is a gift. I imagine what is happening in people's minds and hearts. As a facilitator this gives me a chance to breathe and pause."

The team also found it useful to articulate the difference between a Trainer and a Bridging Leader Facilitator. We share their thoughts in the picture below:



FACILITATION PRINCIPLES

There are many good emergent facilitation resources that are nicely aligned with the ethos and principles of the role of a Bridging Leader facilitator. One such resource is the Barefoot Guide to working with organizations and social change, in which Organization Development facilitators reflect on the principles of good facilitation:

They suggest that a good question to ask in organizational and community development processes is: "Who is participating in whose process?" They go on to reflect:

"As bridging leaders and facilitators we understand that people are already developing and growing along their own journeys. Our role is to help them see their journey more clearly so that they can make their own choices. We are participating in their process!"

"We have deep respect and curiosity for who people are, what they know, what we see of them and even what we do not yet see. (There is always more than meets the eye.)"

"We are interested in and listen deeply to what people think, what they feel and what they want."

"We help each person to surface their own hidden knowledge and resourcefulness, and to appreciate and celebrate their own power."

"We help people ask their own questions, form their own judgements and make their own choices, even if we disagree."

"We help people learn from their own and each other's experiences"

"More importantly, we help them to learn how to learn effectively so that they can become more independent thinkers."

"We work for the good of the whole community or group of participants, not the interests of a few."

Another helpful set of principles comes from Liberating Structures, a collection of micro structures and processes that can help shape the way people relate to each other. The facilitation principles that have shaped these tools include the following:

Include and unleash everyone	Amplify freedom AND responsibility
Practice deep respect for people and local solutions	Emphasize possibilities: Believe before you see
Build trust as you go	Invite creative destruction to enable innovation
Learn by failing forward	Engage in seriously playful curiosity
Practice self-discovery within a group	Never start without clear purpose

Practice: *As a facilitation team a useful way of aligning and sharing your practice is through a discussion on the principles that may guide your work.*

While preparing for the event/ session, share with each other what principles you would like to place at the heart of your practice and why. Agree on a few that you would like to focus special attention on for the session.

THE ROLE OF A

FACILITATOR – NAVIGATING TENSIONS

We acknowledge that the role of a Bridging Leader facilitator can be challenging, especially if there are other roles you play in the same context. The Synergos team found it useful to acknowledge and name these tensions and challenges and support each other in the facilitation team to navigate them. Their reflections may help others on this path.

> I see a tension between being the holder of institutional knowledge in this context and a facilitator who does not want to be seen as having all the knowledge. Sometimes I feel that sharing my knowledge could help ease understanding.

> I see a tension between my role as a facilitator and that of the organizer/ convenor of the workshop who wants to see an efficient and effective process that can close on time.

> Not everyone wants to be a facilitator, or is comfortable in that role. We can appreciate and understand it, but we do not all have to play the role. We can get help.

> Bridging leadership promotes a culture to which powerful people in the system are not yet attuned. In our culture humility can be seen as weakness. We need to recognize this vulnerability for ourselves as facilitators and for participants.

> My other roles in the project seem to dominate or put more pressure on me. I feel I need to ask someone to explicitly take on those other roles temporarily in order for me to be a facilitator.

> I realized that I needed to do my own inner work to deal with frustration, anxiety, uncertainty and injustice in the system. Being able to deal with my own emotions helps me shift into a space where I can ask generative questions to help others reflect onwhat is showing up for them.

WHAT BROUGHT YOU HERE?

While it is important for Bridging Leaders to recognize and value emergent facilitation in the context of their work, not everyone is wants to play this role themselves. Being a facilitator to hold emergent spaces that invite collaboration across divides is a calling and takes some practice. For those of you who are drawn to it and committed to cultivating these skills, something on your path has led you to this role. What is it? Your life journey has brought you here. If you have a few minutes, reflect on this and hold it within you. Bring with you all the motivation, energy, desire, and support that has carried you so far. The short reflection exercise in the box below may help.



Practice:

Find a quiet space, preferably in nature…. Sit a few minutes with your eyes closed (or lower your gaze to avoid distraction). When you feel a sense of calm and readiness, ask yourself… "What is the journey that led me here to this facilitator role… what is the path I am on?"

Pause and listen for the story that comes to you. You may remember specific events or conversations from different times in your life. You may remember a mentor who was instrumental in your journey. You may think of a particular decision you made that may have seemed unusual at the time, but now makes sense to you. Or maybe, your journey doesn't feel coherent… you are here now and you can't imagine what led you here. Take a minute to make some notes if you like.

Take a few deep breaths… stretch if you want, and again bring yourself to a place of calm, closing your eyes or lowering your gaze.

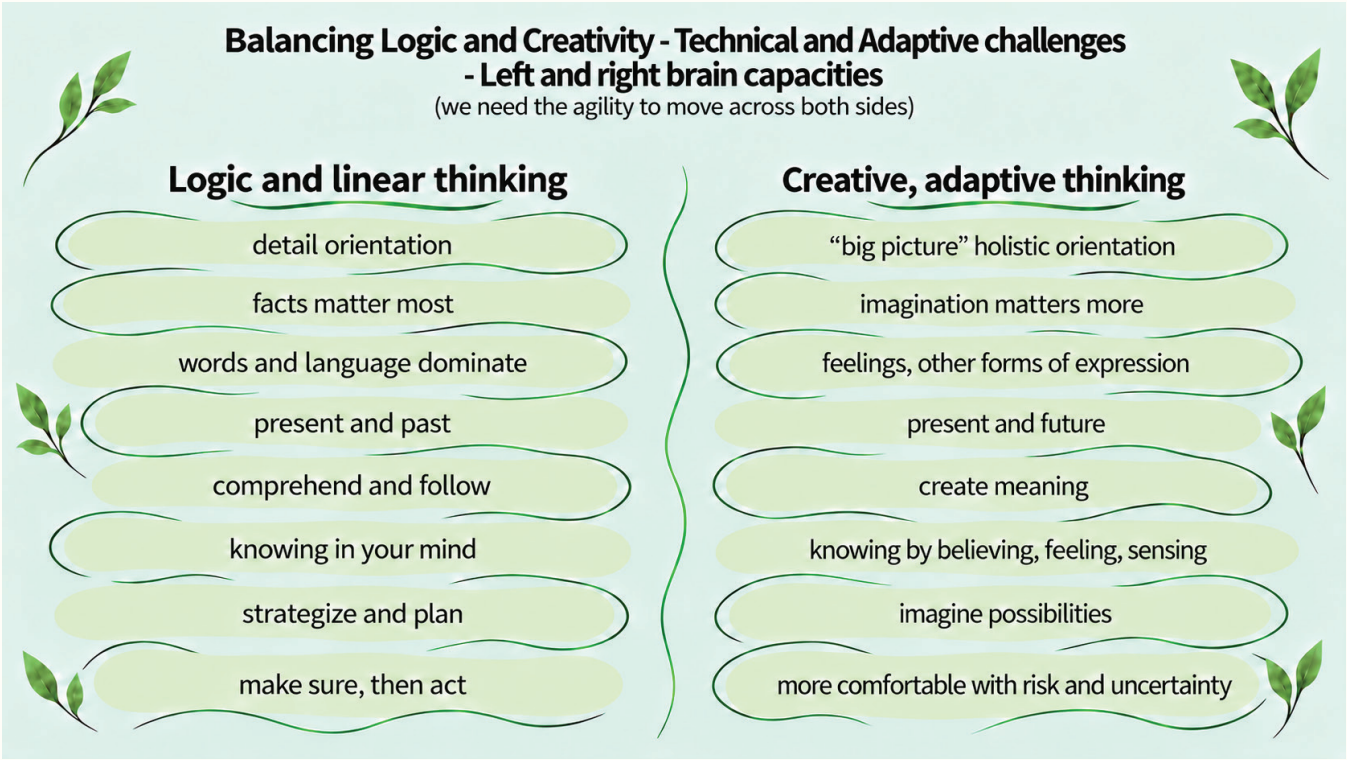
When you are ready, ask yourself… "What do I desire for my work as a facilitator? What energy or color do I sense in this desire?" Make some notes, or practice a gesture, or draw something that represents this desire - it could be a simple shape. The next time you prepare to facilitate a collaborative space, remind yourself of your desire.

BEING A

FACILITATOR IN COMPLEX TIMES

The collaboration we seek in delivering integrated child care, development and protection services is complex and therefore demands a different kind of facilitation than what may be required to run a training session or build a plan for regular activities with which people are familiar. Multistakeholder collaboration is often complex because we do not know exactly what is possible or what may come in the way. There are high levels of uncertainty and there is no formula or ready solution for the challenges we may face. Frequent changes in context such as caused by disasters, political upheaval, pandemics, geopolitics can greatly affect the range of options available for our collaboration. We explored the essence of complexity and adaptive challenges in Chapter 1. We saw that **collaboration in these complex contexts demands clarity of purpose, and depends on our ability to explore emergent solutions, build relationships, and be open to learning together and trying something new together.**

As facilitators of these kinds of processes therefore, we need to become more comfortable with uncertainty ourselves and be able to hold space for this work. Most of our educational training and experience in organizations has prepared us for more logical, thinking processes (work we do in our heads using left brain functions). The same is true of participants in these processes. However, our brains have innate capacity for imaginative, emotional and relational processes (right brain functions). As facilitators for collaboration in complex contexts we must try to harness both sides of our brains to move between both technical and adaptive challenges, complicated and complex problems, helping participants develop the agility to combine logical and linear thinking with creative and adaptive thinking. Noting the characteristics of each (see figure below) may help us create and hold balanced spaces in which people can find their way to collaborate in complexity. To do this, we can embed creative activities in our process. We may do this using stories and metaphors to describe a situation, and find ways to nudge people out of their comfort zone with an eye on the purpose. This will require us to clearly ground ourselves in the role of facilitator, even though we may also play other roles in the community of people who have gathered.



WHAT

HELPS ME AS A FACILITATOR

To be effective emergent facilitators, we may need to prepare differently to the way we prepare for training or other types of facilitation. We ourselves need to draw on our left and right brain and bring our whole selves to the work of facilitation, not just our intellect. Beyond thinking about the agenda, methods and facilitation plans, we need to prepare ourselves to create and hold spaces that accommodate uncertainty and also allow trust and new possibilities to grow.

We invited Marlene Ogawa from Synergos and Andrea Rodericks, a consultant who has worked with the Bangladesh team on the Leadership for Collaboration workshops to reflect on what helps them in their emergent facilitation role.

Andrea reflects:

I pause before a session to center myself. I ask, "What do I need to be fully present here, now?" Sometimes we do this as a facilitation team, allowing each person to share what they need to be fully present. This centers us and helps us support each other

Listening is such a key part of the process of collaboration. I try to intentionally practice generative listening with myself and with participants in and outside sessions… listening beyond the words, with empathy for myself, for others, paying attention to body language and the energy in our space… listening for what is emerging

I sometimes actively identify ways to retreat from the spotlight. Holding emergent space is challenging, especially with participants who may see you as a trainer or expert – they expect you to have all the answers, their attention is on you. I look for ways to retreat to allow them to focus on themselves and their fellow participants, and figure out things together. I resist the temptation to fill awkward or uncomfortable silences, allowing for a certain amount of discomfort, holding the tension for what is ready to emerge. This is not always easy

When I am carrying multiple roles, I make an intentional note to myself when I am stepping into my facilitation role (sometimes even taking a physical step or making a gesture). In this role I am accountable to all participants, not just the team that has invited me to facilitate. I often look for what is going on with the quietest participants, or those who are initially reluctant to engage

I work independently and my contract is often tied to outputs. I remind myself to prioritize the quality of space and authenticity of connection, so as not to overly direct the group toward what I need for contractual outputs and deliverables

I have learned that it is valuable and important to debrief as a facilitation team… this could be about what took place, how we did, surprises, challenges, tensions, and how we may need to adjust our process

An important lesson for me is to genuinely trust participants. What needs to emerge from the group will emerge. Or it will not – I have learned not to force it. I like to imagine myself as the sun in my garden --- the more I trust participants the more trustworthy and vibrant they become

Over time, I have released my tight control and stress around time and content… I pause, breathe and allow the process to flow. I try my best create space for plenty of breaks, and not overcrowd the agenda or offer too many detailed instructions, even if that is what some may want from me

I have learned that in order to ignite people's passion, curiosity and connection, an invitation is more powerful than instructions or obligations

To hold a brave and trustful space, I need to be willing to be vulnerable myself. I have learned to ask for help when I need it and have found that it opens people's hearts.

Marlene reflects:

I like to use tea breaks and lunches to connect with participants, feel them energetically (especially if it is part of a longer journey)

I think about how to embody facilitation principles. Before the workshop, with the facilitation team, we think about which ones we want to practice. We later reflect on which principles were easy to navigate and which harder, and why

I have learned to always appreciate what we have done well – what I appreciate about myself, what I appreciate about the day. We begin with appreciation and then reflect on how it could be "even better."

It helps to be intentional – think about how you will ground yourself when needed. In our facilitation team we set an individual and collective agenda for the day. We also agree on how we will debrief, so that we are ready for it, not just an add-on when we are tired

Sometimes it is helpful to debrief with champions in the group, tapping on them through the day. They may be able to report on the vibe, or pick up on things that facilitators miss

We share, understand, learn, and do it with grace and kindness.

There is a growing community of emergent facilitators focused on holding spaces for transformation and learning from their experience, and hence a growing wealth of growing wealth of resources for facilitators.



DESIGNING

SPACES FOR TRANSFORMATION

The materials in this resource pack are versatile and may be used in workshops as well as day to day meetings or working groups, coordination committees, and many of them are suitable for personal reflection as well. In thinking about holding or supporting spaces for transformation, beyond the activities and agenda, it helps to think about the whole experience. Some tips from the ICBC project facilitation group for the Bridging Leadership workshops are listed here. They may help create a transformative space, whether in a workshop, or a short meeting.

As you start preparing the workshop, think about how you would like people to feel, not just what they should do

Be thoughtful about the seating arrangement. When the group is meeting together in plenary, sitting in a circle with everyone at the same level helps create a more equal space for interactions. If it is important to have group tables, or a stage for speeches, you may consider having two separate spaces, one of them a circle

Think about the roles people may play in the space. Beyond facilitator, co-facilitator, participant, we may invite people to be observers (to notice and share their observations about the interaction beyond the words. Sometimes it is useful to invite someone to play the role of the scribe, to capture reflections that otherwise may be lost

Bringing together the facilitation team to think about the experience we want to create is important. Beyond just the agenda and logistics, make the time for the team to come together around the collective purpose of creating a transformative experience. Always try to debrief after the meeting to learn from the experience and to adjust future sessions

It is worth giving some thought to the kinds of behavioral norms that will help create the space we want. This may include the way we listen to each other, being aware of not taking up too much time talking, speaking with intention, being on time for sessions, bringing our whole selves to the meeting, etc. These norms may be worked out with participants, but it is helpful to think in advance about the kinds of behaviors that may help create the space we want

Prepare participants to value the pauses and silence in holding generative space. This often helps senior people especially to relax, allowing the process to possibly move in new directions

Ending a meeting well is important for the experience and learning to have its full impact and for people to come away eager to pursue the work. As you near the end of a workshop or meeting, senior managers sometimes get nervous about "next steps" and assigning responsibility for follow up. This can lead to rushed planning work, often focused exclusively on what to do with little attention to how to learn or be. Often long lists of tasks are generated leaving people overwhelmed. Sometimes people start to feel helpless because some of what needs to be done is beyond their control. Some ways to address this is to be thoughtful about keeping space and time for a good closing. If commitments or plans are important to the group, be thoughtful about how that may be facilitated aligned with the spirit and ethos of the meeting and agreed norms. For example, the "15% Solutions" method from Liberating Structures helps people identify small actions that they can undertake immediately that could make a big difference. It helps people feel powerful and eager to take the next step.

The way we check-in, check out, or return to meetings after a break can help set the tone and energy in the space and is useful in calling everyone to a collective presence. The box below includes some check-in and check-out invitations that were prepared for the ICBC project Leadership for Collaboration workshops.

Check-in Invitations
To set the tone and bring our collective presence into the space

- **What roles are you carrying today?**
  (Encourage sharing beyond formal professional positions to include life roles—as a parent, an artist, a thinker, a friend, an athlete, etc.)
- **What words would you use to describe where your head is? What words would you use to describe where your heart is?**
- **What is your inner weather like today?**
  (For an online gathering with people joining from different places, invite them to describe both the outer weather and their inner weather.)
- **What is one new and interesting thing you have been thinking about lately?**
- **Why did you accept the invitation to this meeting?**
- **What is something recent that gave you hope or inspiration?**

Coming back to another workshop day

- What has become apparent to you since we last met?
- What worries or fears are bubbling up in you?
- What's one thing you hope to get accomplished at today's session?
- Given what we have done so far, what do you feel best about?

Check-out prompts at the end of a workshop or meeting

- What energy are you leaving this space with? Where do you notice it most in your body?
- What is one insight you are leaving this space with today?
- What question from here is still alive for you?
- What is one word, phrase or gesture you would like to leave this space with?

Planning an agenda for different time scales

While we may want to gather people together in workshops to practice together, the reality is that we work under tremendous time constraints. Whenever possible, it is powerful to take time out in a workshop setting to connect deeply to nourish our collaboration. However, we can draw on these resources to shape our personal practice and all kinds of spaces of interaction. Here are some tips that may help:

In **regular meetings**, such as monthly monitoring or coordination meetings which may be 2-3 hours in length, we can:

- Have thoughtful check-ins and check-outs, inviting people to share something of themselves beyond their technical roles (see some examples above)
- Take a few minutes to help people feel settled and present (possibly through a short mindfulness practice - Chapter 3)
- Be very clear on the purpose of the meeting, beyond describing specific activities and tasks
- Make space for people to share what they are learning, not just what they did
- Try to draw attention to different levels of listening around the issue being shared and invite participants to practice. Encourage participants to express what they are curious about
- In small and big ways, try to draw attention to the wider ecosystem
- Notice and surface tensions in the room and try to get to underlying issues
- In framing follow up actions, try to get clarity on the purpose of these actions, not just the activity
- If these are regular meetings, you may be able to agree on a set of norms for the meeting that the groups is reminded of each time

For a **one-day meeting or workshop** that draws together diverse stakeholders, all of the above suggestions apply. In addition, we can:

- Make some space for work on clarifying shared purpose and how they see the ecosystem. Depending on the purpose of the meeting, this could be through some sort of visioning exercise or unpacking using the iceberg model
- If the meeting is designed around shared plans or collaborative actions, invite inputs on insights and what they are learning (beyond just what they did) and make space to adjust the plans going forward

If embarking on new or adapted actions together, the “Stepping into the shoes of another” exercise (Chapter 1) may be helpful to imagine how the work may play out and will help participants move forward with compassion

Try to make some space for guided journaling for participants to make sense of what they are learning. This may include trying to be attentive to their inner voices (Chapter 3, Building Connection)

Try to meet in spaces with some access to nature – a garden or rooms with nice windows facing out

For a **three-day meeting or workshop** that draws together diverse stakeholders, all of the above suggestions apply. In addition, we can:

Create space for a learning journey (Chapter 2). Note that this takes significant preparation and must allow sufficient time for debriefing

Give participants sufficient time off, but also try to create moments of connection beyond the formal agenda, such as in the evenings

Embed moments for inner work and wellbeing practices

Embed moments of contemplation on personal purpose and offer opportunities for participants to share with other participants the commitment they are making toward shared purpose.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The annexes to this resource pack include a set of facilitation guides for many of the methods described in this pack. There is a growing wealth of resources for facilitators… so many, that it can be confusing. We include here a link to some resources that are aligned with the kind of facilitation that nurtures Bridging Leadership.

One excellent resource comes from **Liberating Structures,** a collection of micro structures and processes that can help shape the way people relate to each other. They remind us that little shifts in conventional patterns can make a big difference in the way we relate and collaborate with each other in a meeting or workshop, or anywhere a group of people gather around a shared purpose. The resource includes facilitation guides over 30 methods (microstructures) available from this site: https://www.liberatingstructures.com/

The Barefoot Guide Connection group has developed an excellent resource: **Designing and Facilitating Creative Conversations & Learning Activities: A Companion Booklet to The Barefoot Guide to learning practices in organizations and social change 2011 – 2019** Written by the Second Barefoot Collective and illustrated by Meg Jordi
https://www.betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/Designing%20and%20facilitating%20creative%20conversations%20%26%20learning%20activities.pdf

We have found the **World Cafe method** to be a helpful way to build understanding around key issues, surface new ideas, and build connection through collaborative dialogue. The World Cafe Community Foundation has produced a simple guide to help anyone interested in facilitating World Cafe sessions. It is available at this site: https://www.theworldcafe.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Cafe-To-Go-Revised.pdf

This blog by Sonja Blignaut outlines **Ten tips for facilitating emergent processes**, for those interested pursuing this journey https://sonjablignaut.medium.com/ten-tips-for-facilitating-emergent-processes-92da3141d664

