

Tips for Effective Facilitation

Girls Coalition Groups can be lively and fun. They can also be challenging. Here are some suggestions for effective Muse facilitation.

Know your role and step into it fully. As the Muse to a group, it's important to give the group a sense of who you are before you get started so they know what to expect of you. Let them know that this is *their* group and you are there to help them talk about the issues that matter to them and to take the group where they want it to go. Also let them know that you are there to create a space that's safe for everyone and that you will remind them of the group norms they developed together and the shared ownership these norms imply.

Know what the objectives are. Share your knowledge of the meeting's objectives at the start of each session as a way of setting context and providing a "road map" of sorts for the conversation. Where appropriate, connect the meeting's planned activities and conversation to the overall purpose of the group to ensure continuity of learning.

Make sure people know each other's names. A common mistake of Muses is to assume that everyone knows everyone else's name – especially after the initial meeting. Err on the side of forgetfulness and ask that people reintroduce themselves for the first couple of meetings. Ask that people use name tags until everyone is fully acquainted.

When in doubt – ASK! If you get lost or have trouble following a conversation – you're probably not the only one. So say something to bring this awareness to the group (i.e., "Where are we in this conversation right now?...I'm lost!"). You are not expected to know all the answers, but you are expected to track the conversation encourage it along or refocus it accordingly.

Be early, be organized, be prepared. If you take the meeting seriously, they will. Be the first person there (give yourself some time to get ready) to greet the girls as they enter. Have all your supplies and materials copied and ready to go. Know the agenda, and do what you need to do to be comfortable with the session (and your role).

Start on time! End on time! If there is resistance to moving ahead, check in with the group: "Are we ready to move on?" or "There seems to be a lot of energy around this topic, do we want to spend some time here or come back to it?" In both instances, you are raising awareness and allowing the group to make its own decision. You're also holding the group accountable to what girls said they wanted to do.

Open "crisply" and close "crisply". Avoid a soggy start to the meeting by waiting for the girls to stop talking (they won't!). Instead, say, "Okay, I think we're ready to begin..." to get people's attention and let them know they are starting on time! Likewise, start to end the meeting by saying, "We only have 5 minutes left... Here's what's left for us to discuss/decide." End promptly by saying something like, "I promised to get you out of here on time, and I keep to my word..." If members continue to linger in conversation after the meeting, make it clear that the "official" group meeting has adjourned so that others may feel free to leave.

Keep the group whole. If side conversations are happening, try to tactfully address them by saying, "I notice we have several conversations going on at once and I don't want us to miss anything..." This will call attention to the side-bar conversations and re-focus the group without being rude (often these conversations are a source of distraction -- and some anxiety -- for girls and they are relieved when they are reigned in). Or by posing the question "How do people feel when there are side conversation," opens up a dialogue among the whole group will allow everyone to share how they feel when side conversation happen and allow everyone to hear how actions can effect the group.



Keep in mind that people learn/communicate/think in different ways, so when you can, mix it up (i.e. give girls time to think in silence before asking questions, get them moving every now and then, create opportunities for small group discussions rather than sticking to the large group all the time). Watch out for people who are “shut down” by the rest of the group because they say something that differs from the group opinion. Give minority views a voice and pay attention to those “throw away” comments or jokes that might hide a clever observation or disguise an astute or resistant point of view.

Make space for EVERYone in the conversation. This is one of your primary roles as a Muse. Everyone needs to feel heard and the way you manage conversations can help ensure this. If three people are talking at the same time, say, “Hold on...too many people at once...” and establish an order so people know they’ll have their turn (i.e. “...Let’s hear from X, then Y, and then, Z...”). If someone was interrupted... interject YOUR voice and say, “...Just a minute, let’s hear what X has to say first...” If you don’t hear from the silent members, make space by inviting them to speak (directly) “Y, we haven’t heard from you on this topic... I’m wondering what your thoughts are...” or (indirectly) “Let’s hear from some other voices in the group...”.

Keep the context for the work ALIVE for the group. Groups can get side-tracked easily. In these cases, it’s easy to forget what they have come together to do. As a Muse, you should periodically refresh what the group objectives are for the session and recalibrate the conversation accordingly: “Okay, it seems we’ve had a pretty thorough discussion about *what* we’d like to see. Let’s move on to talk about *how* we will make that happen.”

Be patient in silence. Groups take time to warm up and get comfortable asking questions and sharing their thoughts (especially if they’re a new group), so when you ask for comments or questions, count to 10 before filling the air with your voice. If you wait long enough, someone will speak (sometimes they’re just thinking or digesting what you’ve asked of them.)

Get curious about the silence. Silence can mean many things in groups – disengagement, resistance, anxiety about taboo topics, boredom, or deep thought. If you notice it, ask about it: “What does this silence mean?” and deepen the group’s learning by being a mirror for them. You will either be highlighting something the group was unaware of or zeroing in on something the group was critically aware of. Either way, your question will call the group’s attention to the present and focus the conversation.

Avoid placing judgment on comments/ideas. This isn’t your place as Muse. If someone has made a comment that “plops” (no one comments on it) ask: “What do people think of X’s suggestion?” Be supporting by acknowledging risk-taking, and by validating all contributions, regardless of whether or not they are popular.

Don’t be too rigid or too loose. Groups can change their mind. Stuff comes up that was unexpected. In these instances, don’t force the agenda simply because that was the “plan”. That won’t help you or the girls. Remember, it’s *their* process; you’re just facilitating it. In this case, just remind them of where they intended to go, and where it is they’re headed. *Acknowledge the shift* and ask them what they’d like to do about it.

Watch and Listen. Body language can speak volumes. As people are talking, watch the reactions. Track who interrupts, who is silent, and who is dominating conversation. These clues will help you become a more effective facilitator. Often people shut down and disengage and no one notices. Without putting people on the spot, try to engage all members (e.g., “We’ve heard a lot from a few members, but I’d like to hear from the other members. Where are you in this discussion?”

You’re not supposed to have all the answers. Often girls will defer to your opinion, ask you to determine the right answer or decide the best course of action. Don’t fall for it! Turn it back over to the group and defer to their wisdom (e.g., “Hmm, that’s a good question and I’m wondering what people in the group have to say in response to it...”). This gets you out of the middle and refocuses the discussion on the group and their learning.

(SheChanges, 2008)

