

# Introduction to Facilitation

by Asaf Bartov <asaf@wikimedia.org>  
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# **Conversation**

Expectations and Hopes

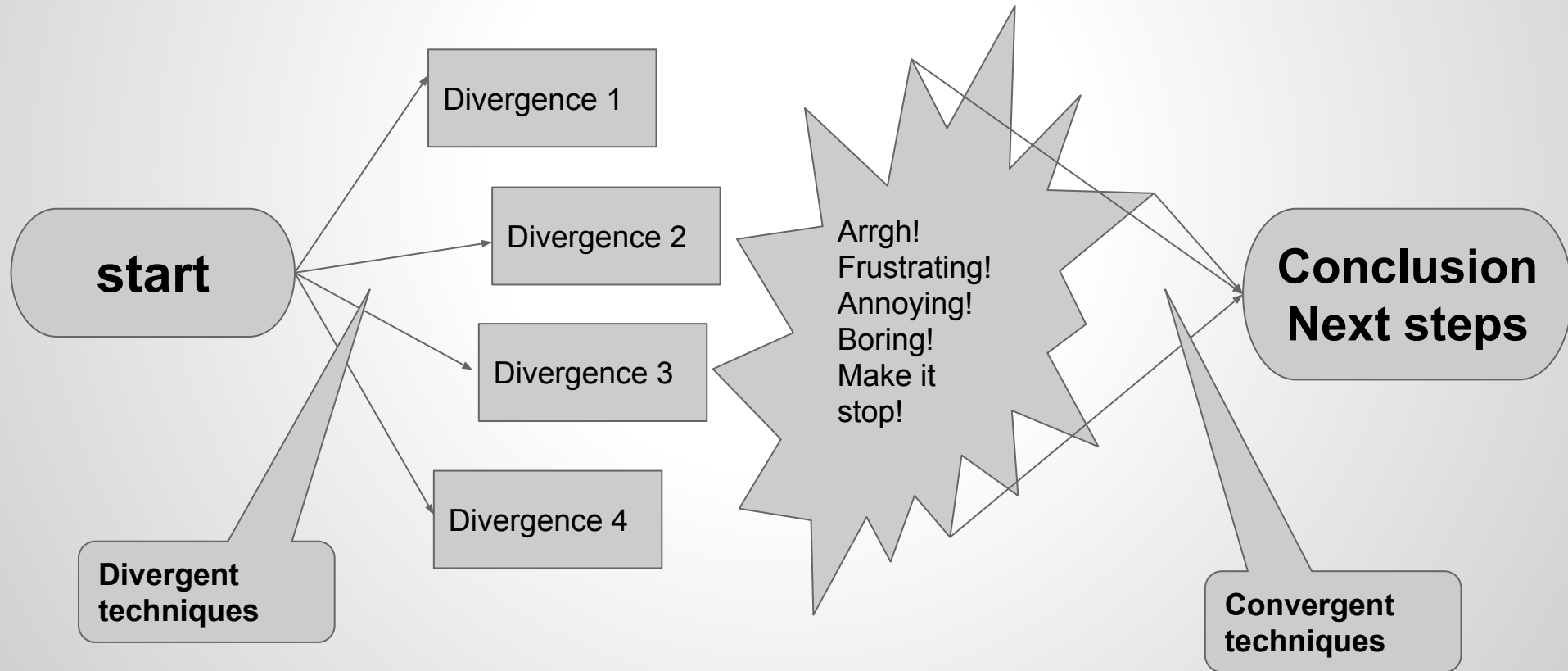
# Agenda

Principle: teach some concrete things well rather than cover "everything" briefly

- Group conversations and how they fail
- Goals of facilitation
- Offline vs. online conversations
- Three conversation types in decision-making
- Facilitation techniques + practical practice
- Lunch!

# Group conversations

- "two people, three opinions"
- divergent vs. convergent techniques



**If only it were this easy...**

# Divergent vs. Convergent Techniques

## Divergent

- free, open discussion
- No-judgment  
creative, generative  
thinking  
("brainstorming")
- increasing diversity  
via deliberate  
questions
- Ignoring constraints

## Convergent

- Nutshelling /  
summarizing
- categorizing and  
bucketing
- evaluating against  
reality, constraints
- Judging and prioritizing  
alternatives

# Why do conversations fail?

"All human communication fails, except by accident" -- Prof. Osmo A. Wiio [[Wiio's Laws]]

- Humans! \*shakes fist\*
- People want to express themselves; sometimes feel misunderstood; repeat.
- Others want closure; impatience; annoyance
- Others confused; lost; distracted
- **so:** expect group conversations to include frustration, confusion; they are the price.

# Goals of Facilitation

- (Lat. facilis) Help groups achieve their best potential through communication; *ease* their work
- encourage:
  - **full participation**
  - **mutual understanding**
  - **inclusive solutions**
  - **shared ownership**
- help groups through (inevitable) tension and conflict
- Who is the facilitator working for?

# Offline vs. online conversations

- **offline skills largely applicable to online conversations**
- **main differences:**
  - online conversations are mostly non-real time; wiki conversations, in particular, are not (blessing and curse)
  - Online conversations offer fewer signals to go on -- tone, body language -- facilitation more challenging



# Three communication situations in decision-making

- **Type 1:** unidirectional; announcements; FYI
- **Type 2:** consultative; initial topic/question; input given by group for later, separate decision-making by individuals in authority
- **Type 3:** deliberative/collaborative; group discussion; group decision
- How do these apply to the wiki?
- What is the **default** decision type on-wiki?
- Framing makes a difference

# **Facilitation Techniques**

# Facilitation techniques

- Listening techniques
- Participation techniques
- Progress techniques
- Facilitating with a POV
- Lists and categories
- Alternatives to open discussion

# Listening techniques

- Paraphrasing and mirroring
- Follow-up
- Linking and inviting re-statements; naming individuals
- Acknowledging and naming feelings
- Legitimizing differences

Remember you are acting on behalf of the entire group.

# **Listening Exercise**

"Should Wikipedia be more like a social network?"

# Participation techniques

- Gathering ideas / perspectives
- Balance / Devil's advocate / rebalance
- Invitation; make space for quiet ones
- Flipcharts as engagers

# Participation Exercise

"How should we respond to government attempts at censorship of content on Wikipedia?"

# Progress techniques

- queueing as engagers
  - interrupting the queue
- tracks / demultiplexing
- identifying common ground, and diffs
- summarizing, refocusing (suggest!)
- using the clock
- lists, categories -- predefined vs. Metaphysics



# Progress Exercise

"If we had to, what sister projects would you have WMF close down and why?"

or

"What new sister projects should WMF consider, and why?"

# **Facilitating chaos and despair**

someone's gotta do it...

# Facilitating chaos and despair

- the main goal: help the group develop shared understanding
- use all your listening skills; use participation skills to help the group listen to each other
- renew energy by switching formats; pick a fresh one

# Chaos and despair: Useful formats

- systematically explore individual perspectives, with time discipline and Q&A
  - the goal is understanding; not resolving differences; stop argumentativeness cold.
- "If I were you"
- "Name a useful question to ask everyone"
- Facts vs. Opinions exercise
- "If I could remove one constraint" / "change one thing" ...
- ...

# Facilitating with a point of view

- Acknowledge your hats
- State your position briefly
- Facilitate for a while
- Participate again
- make switches obvious and explicit

# **Alternatives to Open Discussion**

N hours of open discussion can be exhausting  
"Variety is the spice of life" -- William Cowper

Variety => Energy => Engagement => Progress

# Alternatives to Open Discussion: plenum

- structured go-arounds
- Formal [to varying degrees] debates
- [Fishbowl session](#)
- ...

# Alternatives to Open Discussion: groups

- working groups; rotating groups
- individual writing exercises
- role-playing
- [world café](#) (working groups + doodling)
- Framing is key:
  - state purpose
  - organize participants (wait for noise to end)
  - summarize process, roles, rules
  - note the time allotted
  - debrief at end (reunite as plenum; expose diversity), asking "what are you noticing?", "Have you heard anything new or surprising?", "what concerns you?"



# **Designing Effective Sessions**

the alternative is hoping sessions are  
magically effective...

**Remember:**

Topics  $\neq$  Process

# Effective sessions

- get clarity on topics, and on goals (per topic)
- imagine desired outcomes (what would achieving the session goal yield?)
- select formats that are a good fit for the group and the outcomes needed, and plan the session's progress,
  - e.g. 1. brainstorm; 2. prioritization; 3. breakout groups; 4. debrief and open discussion; 5. decisions and next steps
- allocate time (be realistic)
- ideally, share this planning work with the group, in advance, and invite participation.

# Dealing with Difficult Dynamics

There always is one...  
(only one, if you're lucky...)

# Dealing with difficult dynamics

- Do you know that person who...
  - ...repeats his own and others' ideas?
  - ...speaks with uncomfortably strong emotion?
  - ...or too loudly?
  - ...apologizes for everything they say?
  - ...nitpicks every analogy?
  - ...whispers or passes notes while someone is talking?
  - ...disguises disagreement with sugar-coating
  - ...raises a pet issue no matter what is being discussed?
  - ...is always insufferably smug and self-assured?
  - ...

# Dealing with difficult dynamics

- Resist dampening of thinking in public
  - "you're repeating yourself"; "you're rambling"; "that's crazy"; "keep it simple!"; "stop wasting time"
- Instead, encourage thinking:
  - "take your time"; "that must have felt bad"; "interesting!"; "hold on, I think she's making an important point!", ...
- switch format (to more structure; to smaller audience; to meta-discussion)
- Amplify the weak; moderate the strong
- If you have the power to exclude, use it sparingly, only on the basis of clear rules of conduct, and only after at least one clear, explicit warning

# Highly Recommended Reading

*Facilitator's Guide to Participatory  
Decision-Making*

by Sam Kaner et al., ISBN 1118404955

# **Thanks for listening!**

Have you learned something?

[asaf@wikimedia.org](mailto:asaf@wikimedia.org)