

# Facilitation at the Frontlines

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## Reflections on facilitation at blockades and action camps, or... “if facilitation was an extreme sport”

Nicola Paris – CounterAct, June 2015

I have done a lot of facilitation in challenging environments. Like many of us, thrown in the deep end, and learning to swim by thrashing around and seeing what helped me not drown.

From facilitating many hundreds at Occupy Melbourne, including next to a naked guy who stripped off as part of his ‘proposal’, to the first climate camp in Newcastle in 2008 where a spokescouncil model was used by many people for the first time – large scale consensus decision making with hundreds of people, and some very firm set agendas, to lots of facilitation at various blockade camps, including in the middle of police raids with all the challenges that entails.

Here are some things I have learned.

Firstly, it is bloody hard work, often unappreciated and you can become the target of peoples frustrations as it can be perceived that facilitators are organisers, or in control of the situation, when that is not necessarily the case. Most people don’t notice good facilitation, but they sure as hell notice bad facilitation. It can be scary to step up, but we need more people to, and we should encourage new people by co-facilitating, and buddying up for preparation and reflection.

### Logistics

Can often be incredibly challenging. We are often pressed for time, and there is often not what facilitators would talk about as a ‘safe container’. People are literally walking in and out of meetings, keeping strange hours due to actions, and there can be stress, burn out and drinking – even when we aim for there not to be.

Think about what will help hold a ‘container’ or peoples focus. Here are some practical considerations

#### ❖ **Amplification**

Is often an issue – whether it be at a blockade camp, or trying to make consensus decisions on the fly at actions where people are really spread out. Try and have this well set up, by having the rights tools for the situation, and setting up DIY or wheelee bin solar type set ups that can be mobile for actions, and help with amplification and announcements. At the minimum try and learn how to project your voice. Standing up is often useful if you are softly spoken. It takes practice. People being frustrated by

not being able to hear means chatter starts at the edges and can be distracting for everyone, and make the problem worse.

❖ **Holding the space**

Even temporary spaces can be set up in ways that are conducive for keeping focus on meetings/workshops. Think about barriers that will help enclose the space... even if it is partly psychological... material, banners, flags or bunting can help delineate areas... it can be useful not to set up a big meeting place right next to a kitchen or other social spaces as well...where there will inevitably (and should be!) lots of fun and chatter as people prepare meals together.

Set up a culture where people take small conversations far away from group settings...it can be very difficult if you are trying to have a challenging discussion and there is all kinds of chatter at the edge of a shed or large marquee.

❖ **Comfort**

A little comfort goes a long way. Even if you can't have all kinds of comfy bean bags and cushions, at least some carpet, and shade/shelter, decent lighting, chairs for elders.

Being mindful that people need breaks, (and breaks take time when 50 people want a cup of tea from a billy or water on the fire) and letting kitchen crew know when these might be can be useful so there is plenty of boiling water for cuppas... otherwise people will wander off when it suits them and the group can get easily fragmented.

❖ **Who the hell is that person anyway?**

Introduce yourself, even if making announcements – people want to know who is talking to them, and try to share this simple task around so people see the variety of people involved in the organising.

❖ **Timing**

Everything takes longer than you think it will... is a pretty good rule of thumb. Particularly if people have to queue for toilets, wait for hot water to boil, cook for 150 people on two gas burners, or get to know each other in order to do a brave, confronting action. Make sure there is room to breathe in the agenda, and break time. Don't over-program.

**Practical stuff**

Large clear signage is really important. A chalkboard or whiteboard that clearly shows the agenda and what is happening at any given time on the outskirts of a meeting space is very helpful. In really large meetings, or when there is comings/goings from camp, having a full facilitation team can be very helpful. Two co-facilitators, and some “rovers” ... people that

circulate along the edges of a meeting space and welcome new people, bring them up to speed quietly or can perhaps deal with any conflict that arises can be useful.

### **Highlighting other people that can help**

Facilitators will often get engulfed in all kinds of micro detail questions from people, simply because they are visible. Have a logistics, kitchen and first aid crew...and other roles, clearly identifiable with arm bands or other markings – and encourage folks to go to the right people with queries... not in a 'I'm too important to talk to you' way, but to highlight that there are many moving parts and some people are designated to know much more about the detail of certain parts!

Also, keep in touch with key reps from those groups as well, so logistics and housekeeping announcements can be made when they need them. It's really important to stay in touch with the kitchen crew especially. Bulk cooking for 150 people with unskilled volunteers on basic facilities is incredibly time consuming and sometimes there can be delays. Knowing in advance to move the agenda around when you are pressed for time, because dinner is going to be an hour late, can be really helpful.

### **Internal organisation with the facilitation team**

The facilitation team needs to meet regularly, and check in, at pre-arranged times. It sounds simple but bring a watch. Mobile phones and power are often challenges. If you do have mobiles and range new messaging tools such as "WhatsApp" or preferably more secure tools such as "Signal" or "Wickr" are good ways to share quick updates with a core group, and let people know if an urgent issue needs to be resolved.

It can be incredibly frustrating doing the rounds of a large space looking for other people who you were supposed to meet with. Don't be shy with asking someone to help core organisers or facilitators do their job by bringing a bunch of plates of food if you are meeting over lunch or dinner breaks. Spending 30 minutes queuing for food when that is all the time you have to talk can be counterproductive. People don't mind!

Also, be clear on the scope of the group... is the group just doing facilitation, or also organising actions, or dealing with conflict resolution, or managing logistics as well? Ideally not, but make sure there are clear lines of communication and a shared understanding regardless.

A separate safer spaces/conflict resolution team is useful.

### **Being calm in the face of challenges**

It can be hard but it is really important to try and keep calm, even as confronting situations arise – whether that be finding out a police informant is in the group, or there is a massive show down looming between groups with political differences. If you need to deal with an urgent issue that has arisen, take the time to do it properly. If you are in mid facilitation, find a natural spot for a break, and have a quick huddle with key folks, and work out how to deal with it. You can really set the tone of events with facilitation and if you look panicked,

the group will panic ☺ Ideally you have shared co-facilitation so someone can take the lead, whilst someone else deals with an issue that has come up (eg: making sure the police liaison knows to go and deal with police, or working out whether to let media on site)

### **Be transparent**

Often in action camps there are declarations of “no leaders” ... whilst this is a principle we all aim for, it is disingenuous to suggest that there is no leadership. Make clear who are points of contact for various pieces of the puzzle, and if there is a ‘quick decision making group’ during actions or the camp, then let people know who is on it and/or nominate people to be on it, and ensure they are folks that people are comfortable with representing a diversity of the group.

### **Debrief**

Always debrief, with the group, but also with the team. We need more, better facilitation in our movement and often people are reluctant to fulfill this incredibly vital role. Make sure people are constantly learning.

### **Have fun dammit**

**We are faced with immense challenges, and it sometimes seems overwhelming. Being able to laugh at ourselves and have fun is about one of the most important things we can do.**