

**Tools & Techniques for “Facilitating Introverts”**  
**Chicago IAF – May 16, 2014**  
**(5/16/14 workshop participant additions in green)**

**Setting**

Be conscious about the choice of meeting venues.

Choose venues that offer participants opportunities to be alone or have quiet conversations -- e.g., nooks & crannies, a “quiet room”, a deck, a nearby park.

Select music, decorations, and food options that are subdued or familiar. Introverts can be sensitive to stimuli and novelty.

**Pre-Event**

Consider asking individuals to invite people they know and/or make attendee lists public. Introverts may be more comfortable attending events when they expect to see familiar faces.

Share supporting and background documentation in advance. Introverts need time to reflect and prepare.

Send each participant a personalized email with facilitator contact information so that people can easily ask questions or comments prior to the session/meeting.

Give homework assignments that allow participants to think about the issues they will discuss. Be sure to use, even if only a few people complete.

Provide an agenda-schedule in advance and/or at arrival so participants know what to expect.

Create an event website with a discussion function. Start using it before the event to help participants think about the topic. Use it again after the event to share ideas.

**Beginnings**

Be thoughtful in the design of registration and pre-meeting activities. The arrival period can be particularly awkward for introverts.

Designate a “host” whose job is to help people feel comfortable - - e.g., introducing people to others or suggesting an activity.

Give people something to do when they arrive that helps facilitate connections – e.g., creative station to make nametags.

Create meeting agreements that minimize the risk of criticism – e.g., “keep an open mind”, “build on ideas”. Ask participants if they have anything to add to these community agreements.

Warm up participants gradually. Start with exercises or questions everyone can “get right”.

Don’t begin with activities that require intense social interaction. This can exhaust introverts.

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Design early social interactions so participants can share information that is meaningful but not too personal. Introverts dislike “small talk” with strangers.

Icebreakers should be early, simple, and for short periods (10 minutes). Minimize socializing, but get the blood flowing.

Choose an icebreaker or activity to assess the introversion and extroversion in the group in order to harmonize the group.

**Expectations**

Clearly define meeting goals and objectives – e.g., building relationships, generating ideas, creating plans, evaluating results. Extroverts often prioritize action and speed. Thoughtfulness and creativity (where introverts often excel) can take more time. This needs to be made clear from the start so participants can adjust expectations.

Put meeting objectives in the form of a question.

Tell participants what they will do next in a meeting to help them transition between activities.

Actively use a displayed agenda as the meeting progresses – e.g., make check marks to show progress.

Write out directions for activities or deliverables on a board in the room.

Before, at the beginning, and during the meeting clearly articulate the questions individuals in the group will be expected to answer. This helps introverts to process the discussion as it’s ongoing and lessens the pressure they might feel to speak before they’re ready.

Before you call on anyone in a meeting, let the group know what the question will be and that you will be calling on individuals.

**Choices**

Provide choices and options that allow individuals to manage their energy and social comfort levels themselves.

Offer lots of alternatives framed in an appropriate way (not drawing attention to introverts).

Use talking objects and structured “go-arounds”. Let participants “pass” if they don’t wish to speak. Give those who haven’t spoken another chance to talk. It can take introverts more time than others to compose what they want to say. Then they may say a lot and facilitator might need to summarize.

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Allow individuals to take breaks whenever they need them, no questions asked.

During group breaks, in addition to offering refreshments and networking, also suggest quieter alternatives (e.g., “here’s a good place for a peaceful walk”, “there’s a quiet room upstairs”).

During meals, provide options that encourage different levels of socializing – e.g., small tables for 2-4, quiet tables on the side or outdoors, large tables with a facilitated or themed discussion.

**Post-event**

Provide ways for participants to share and discuss ideas after the meeting/event has finished – e.g., a listserv or event website with a discussion forum. Introverts often get their most creative and insightful ideas several days after a meeting.

Be sure to incorporate post-event feedback into any final reports or outputs.

**Silences**

Remember “the power of the pause” (silences).

Give participants a few minutes of quiet time to reflect on a question before beginning group discussions. This could be in one’s head, on paper, or recorded into dictation software.

During long discussions, strategically use “time-outs”, “moments of silence”, and breaks to allow introverted participants to “catch up” in processing information.

Consider allowing participants to ask for a moment of silence “if they sense the need”.

Wait at least 10-15 seconds after asking a question before moving on, even if no response.

Become comfortable with silences and pauses. If nobody is talking, it may be because they are busy thinking. A talkative group is not necessarily productive.

During individual reflective exercises, consider providing total silence. Calming background music can be helpful for some people, but can also be distracting for others.

**Equalize**

Communicate and make explicit the value of differences. Create a structure to contain one and push one.

Encourage/allow/push/nudge extroverts to listen and introverts to share.

Remind participants that everyone has obligations and responsibilities to the success of the meeting. Talkative participants need to be aware when they might be hogging the space and quieter participants need to notice when they’re holding back from sharing an idea that might

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unlock a situation or problem.

Balance activities that are more “extroverted” with those that are more “introverted” so as to meet the needs of people throughout the I-E spectrum.

Don’t be afraid to gently “push” introverts a bit out of their comfort zone – e.g., with improv games where participants must think in the moment.

Consider group processes like circle or structured go-arounds where each participant is invited to talk while others listen and refrain from interrupting.

Ask the group “what are the silent ones saying?” or “how are the ones who have not yet spoken feeling?” Even if nobody speaks, this may lead extroverts to quiet down and wonder what their introverted colleagues may be thinking. **But don’t enable or allow extroverts to speak on behalf of introverts.**

Give each participant 2-3 toothpicks or objects, representing how many times they may speak in a round. They throw the object into a bowl after every time they speak.

Make clear in advance if a group/collective response or agreement is needed – or – if individual sharing is sufficient. This might cue introverts that they should actively contribute.

**Use an object to limit or promote individual contribution.**

**Consider online/distance learning approaches like teleconferences to equalize participants.**

**One-on-one activities can be great equalizing activities.**

**Divert attention**

Use role play. Introverts might more openly share information if it comes from “a character” vs. themselves. Many actors are introverts.

**Consider perspective-taking exercises like Edward de Bono’s Six Thinking Hats.**

Provide ways to share non-mainstream view without putting oneself on the spot – e.g., “devil’s advocate” or ask “what might those impacted by this issue but who aren’t in the room think”.

Use paired exercises where participants share with the larger group what the other person said. Introverts might share another’s ideas more freely than their own.

Provide ways to share ideas anonymously, such as “parking lots”, “reflection ponds”, and “graffiti walls”.

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Write answers to a question on small slips of paper. Put them in a bowl. Have others pick them at random and read out loud to group.

**Non-Verbal**

Put paper and markers on table and invite scribbling and doodling while others speak. **Draw or doodle to relax, think, and create.**

Provide pipe cleaners, clay, legos, etc. for building and prototyping.

**Have toys and/or other tactile instruments (e.g., squeeze balls, playdough, etc.) for use by participants.**

Respond physically to a question. For example, line up across the room by agreement or disagreement with a statement, stomp your feet if you've done x, change places in the room to indicate your preferences.

Offer activities where people move around thoughtfully – e.g., an Idea Gallery, activity stations.

Invite people to breathe, to stand, to stretch, to look around (and outside). Introduce simple mudras or Qi Gung stances as transition steps before or after "headier" parts of the work. The simple instruction to "feel your feet on the floor" or "feel your weight on the chair" can help participants "catch up with ourselves" and to notice what we really want and need to say.

**Choose physical activities that stimulate both sides of the brain (the “right” and “left” sides).**

Be sure to incorporate written and non-verbal input in reporting and decision-making, not only what was said verbally.

When approaching convergence, voting or decision-making consider using non-verbal approaches such as silent clustering, dot voting, or physical movement to express opinions (e.g., degree of agreement or disagreement).

**Tap into the rich inner life of introverts. Consider exercises that use visualization and daydreaming. Have participants imagine textures, colors, what something looks like.**

**Layering**

Focus on one topic at a time. Introverts can get lost if too many different threads are introduced at once.

Use nested discussions, moving from smaller to larger groups (pairs, then groups of 4, then groups of 8), to build on and/or integrate diverse ideas.

**Begin with small group ice breakers and gradually move to larger group activities (groups of 4**

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up to group of 30). Intensity is not necessarily a problem.

Before moving on to a new topic, ask “what else?” or “what might we have missed?”. Introverts can take in more information than others and contribute missing perspectives or ideas.

**Observation**

Ask for volunteer listeners. “Dedicated listeners” might listen for certain themes or interpret discussions through a specific lens. “Keynote listeners” might listen for overall themes. Introverts can be deep and thorough listeners.

Assign a quiet participant the role of a traffic light (e.g., green, amber, red). Ask them to be a gauge for the temperature of the group on an issue.

**Additional Design Thoughts**

Good facilitation is critical to fully include introverts.

Don't collapse shyness with introversion. *Shyness is fear of social judgment. Even extroverts can be shy.*

Never ever label a person or an exercise as “for introverts” or say for example “this activity is for people who can't handle networking”.

Consider pacing. Shift the energy, e.g., by slowing down or introducing improv.

Vote or make decisions a few days after the meeting. This gives introverts time to fully process and reflect on the information. Or consider iterative cycles of “meet – reflect – meet again – reflect”.

Provide clear ground rules for structured exercises, especially when the subject evokes a lot of passions. Even introverts can get quite passionate about subjects they really care about.