Communication Skills for Effective Facilitation

Effective communication skills are critical in the facilitation process. How the facilitator communicates makes a difference in the depth, openness and quality of the discussion, efficiency of the meeting as well as the outcomes. Use the following skills and strategies to facilitate effective, productive meetings.

Active Listening	Be genuinely interested in group member's thoughts and observations. Listen intently as they explain or dialogue. Use eye contact to acknowledge you are listening and focused. Ask thoughtful follow-up questions.
Modeling	Practice behavior that you want reflected back to you. Demonstrate non-judgmental responses to ideas, comments or suggestions. Monitor you own nonverbal messages to assure that you are modeling what you intend!
Summarizing	Check your perceptions with the group. Pull together two related ideas stated in different ways by different individuals. For example: "I think Jim and Tina have the same general thoughts on why this is important information…." Summarizing can be used to 'close' a portion of the discussion that has run its course or is beginning to get off track.
Paraphrasing	Clarify group understanding of an individual's idea or remark. A method of restating in your own words what someone else has said. Done in a non-judgmental manner, to seek understanding and not to confront or challenge. Don't just 'parrot' what someone says or states. Instead put it in your own words for everyone to understand it in the same way.
Focused Attention and Pacing	Keep the group moving forward. Limit or reduce repetition. Ensure everyone's voice gets heard. Use summarizing and paraphrasing to speed up, slow down or return to an earlier topic if additional information comes to light. This is the facilitator's primary responsibility. Use a Parking Lot to keep track of off topic but important items to address at another time.
Waiting or Silence	Sometimes the hardest thing to do is nothing. Get comfortable with the '30 second rule' to allow people time to gather their thoughts (or sometimes courage!) before responding to questions posed by you or others.
Scanning/Observing	Nurture full participation from the group. Watch nonverbal cues in the form of body language, facial expressions and gestures. 'Read' into what you are seeing from one or more team members. It may mean you need to change the pace (faster or slower), move to a different topic, return to an earlier topic or use summarizing or paraphrasing to help identify what appears to be confusion, discontent, loss of attention, etc.
Equalizing Participation	Make sure everyone has an equal opportunity to participate. Encourage those who have been quiet, but do not call them out or put them on the spot, either. Ask specific questions of quieter members to get their voices into the room. Sometimes it's necessary to gently discourage someone who is 'over participating' by paraphrasing what they said and then asking others what they have to add to that comment. Phrase your questions in a way that sets the expectation that people will respond. For example, NOT: "Does anyone want to start?" INSTEAD: "Who will start us off?"