

# MOTIVATIONAL MAGIC

Seven Essential Facilitation  
Strategies to Engage Youth  
and Promote Experiential Learning



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**F**acilitation when done well is an art, the expression of facts and opinions in a way that stimulates the most passive learner, transforms thinking and invites understanding. Lacking formal training in classroom instruction, many workforce practitioners struggle to keep their participants engaged. New facilitators often wonder:

- How can I design a workshop for young people who express no interest in learning job readiness skills?
- How do I keep control of a classroom of energetic youth, while not stifling the learning process?
- How do I actually get them to use the lessons from the classroom in the real world?

Many new instructors confuse the role of facilitator with that of a traditional teacher. Adopting the lecture-based approach of imparting information from an “expert” to a “novice,” they inadvertently push participants into a passive role in the learning process—often replicating the negative dynamics of disempowerment and boredom that lead so many young people to drop out of school. True facilitation, by comparison, elicits information primarily from the participants themselves, challenging them to work actively through issues together, learn from each other, and take responsibility for their own success. In this role, the facilitator is less a teacher than a traffic cop, observing the flow of the room, prompting with thought-provoking questions to keep the conversation moving, and intervening only when necessary.

Below are seven essential facilitation strategies that demonstrate confidence, promote inclusiveness, and stimulate growth. Use them to create learning experiences that are fulfilling and fun for young people.

## STRATEGY #1: UNDERSTAND WHAT MOTIVATION REALLY MEANS

Start by banishing the word “lazy” from your vocabulary. Lazy simply means that others do not want to do what we want them to do. Everyone is excited by something, and even the most lackluster participants grow animated when talking about video games, basketball, music or whatever else their passions may be. Human beings by nature generally act in what they believe to be their own best interest, even if young people often have a hard time focusing on the future. Ultimately, engaging them requires tapping into their passions (or helping them develop new passions) and showing that employment—however meager it may

“Learning is  
more effective  
when it is an  
active rather  
than a passive  
process”

—Kurt Lewin

Father of Modern  
Social Psychology  
1890-1947

seem at first—truly is in their best long-term interest. To put it another way, facilitators must often figure out how to motivate youth to do what they might not want to do in order to achieve what they ultimately want to achieve.

### STRATEGY #2: FOCUS ON SUCCESS TO INSPIRE HOPES AND DREAMS

It frequently falls to the facilitator to help young people recognize the assets, talents, and skills they already possess as the building blocks to much greater achievements. Unfortunately, workforce programs often unintentionally fail to promote these strengths by focusing primarily on barriers. Program marketing emphasizes the requisite barriers to join; intake paperwork asks about very personal, negative life experiences like dropping out of school or substance abuse; the drab physical environment of many underfunded non-profits sends the message that the program is not a place of success; top-heavy rules and regulations encourage disobedience and conflict with authority. This “deficit-orientation” does not create the mind frame necessary to change underlying negative patterns of thinking.

Start to offset negative baggage by sending messages of hope and emphasizing positives wherever possible. Below are a few ideas to bring success into the classroom:

- Plaster the classroom with pictures of people at different jobs.
- Use motivational signs and sayings. One favorite: “Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery; None but ourselves can free our minds.”—Bob Marley, Redemption Song.
- Create a “Wall of Fame” with photographs of all former participants who have completed an internship, earned a GED, landed a job, etc.
- Have participants applaud their peers who achieve even small successes like completing a computer skills module.
- Install a bell in the classroom that participants ring when they achieve a significant milestone, such as landing an interview.
- Ask a current or former participant who is doing really well to help run orientations. Seeing someone who looks like them and has been in their shoes will bring home to the new members that this program really works.
- Revise the intake paperwork and start counseling sessions by asking positive questions first—“At the end of this program, what do you want to have achieved?” “How is what you learned in class this week going to be helpful in your life?” “What do you like best about this program?”—before turning to negatives.
- Visibly reward even small efforts. Inexpensive tokens of recognition like handwritten notes of congratulation and “Participant of the Week” certificate ceremonies for the person who showed the most improvement can inspire young people to work harder.
- Reinforce something positive about each participant, no matter how small. “Thanks for coming to the workshop on time. It shows me that you are serious about your job search.” “You’re doing a nice job with this resume writing assignment.”
- Call attention to something admirable or interesting about each person. “You’re the kind of person who speaks up when something bothers you, and that’s a real strength.” “Your willingness to respond to the hard questions shows that you’re really thinking about this.”
- “Blame” people for their successes using “how” questions that reinforce positive efforts and build confidence. “How did you know that would work?” “You found a job in spite of your difficulties. How did you manage to do it?”

### TRY THIS: “A Dream Deferred”

Use the Langston Hughes poem “A Dream Deferred” to spark discussion about participants’ hopes and dreams.

What happens to a  
dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like  
rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

See the discussion points  
on the following page >>



### STRATEGY #3: AFFIRM POSITIVE TALK AND BEHAVIORS

Motivational psychology offers several useful tools for facilitators. Counselors often find that a person's thought and behavior patterns can start to change simply by hearing someone else express confidence in the ability to change. (For example, a young person told at orientation that anyone willing to put in the effort can graduate—no matter his or her background—may, in fact, begin thinking seriously about what it takes to succeed.) More importantly, people tend to commit to the course of action they verbalize, so getting a young person to talk about positive behaviors greatly increases the likelihood of actually engaging in those behaviors.<sup>1</sup> Facilitators who continually encourage success and affirm positive talk and behaviors can shift focus from the barriers their young people face to the opportunities before them—leading to enhanced motivation as they gain confidence in the program and their own abilities.

Instead of...	Try...
"Let's start with the rules and regulations." (presupposes that problems will occur)	"I'm really glad you're joining the program. A lot of young people just like you have found their first job through this program."
"You're late nearly every day. One more time and we're going to have to suspend you."	"Some days you're here on time. What's different about your routine on those days?"
"If you act that way on a job, the employer is going to fire you."	"What do you think is likely to happen if you acted that way on a job? What other ways could you have handled that situation?"
"I know you've got problems, but you really need to figure out what you want to do in life."	"Imagine a miracle happens tonight and all your problems are solved. What will be different in your life six months from now?"

### STRATEGY #4: LOOSEN CONTROL

Fearing chaos in their classrooms, inexperienced or insecure facilitators often keep a tight grip over the proceedings. They allow no deviations from lesson plans and exercises, limit group discussion and debate, and generally refuse to give young people much of a role in the planning and delivery of the workshops. The most engaging facilitators, by contrast, encourage—and even require—their young people to take an active role in both learning and teaching. Shifting the classroom focus from instructor to participants sends a powerful message that different experiences and perspectives are valued and valuable.

Instead of...	Try...
a dry recitation on what makes for a good resume (yawn)	handing out four resumes with similar experience but of differing quality. Ask the group which person they would call if they were an employer and why they chose that person's resume
continually nagging participants who show up in street clothes that they will need to dress better for interviews	holding up pictures of people in different styles of clothing and ask the group who they would hire if they were running a flower shop? an auto garage? a hotel? Why does what people wear reflect on how others perceive them?
planning every lesson yourself	assigning teams of participants to prepare lessons on different topics that they will teach to the rest of the class

### continued "A Dream Deferred"

Ask a young person to read the poem aloud and have the group discuss what they think it means. Allow each person to create a collage by pasting pictures from magazines on a flip chart page to share how the poem relates to their own life. What dreams have they deferred? What will happen if they never pursue their dreams? How would life be different if they achieved their dreams? Everyone presents and explains his or her collage to the rest of the group, and all of the collages adorn the classroom wall for the remainder of the cycle as a visual reminder of what they have to gain... or lose.



### STRATEGY #5: KNOW YOURSELF

Facilitating a group requires dexterity to move fluidly between lecturer, trust builder, active listener, conversation framer and manager, coach, entertainer, motivator, and synthesizer of ideas. Each facilitator’s unique combination of strengths and ability to integrate tricks of the trade will influence his or her personal style. Understanding your preferred style and knowing how to address any weaknesses is essential to effective facilitation.

Basic personality plays a fundamental role in facilitation style. Extraverts—people who feel comfortable striking up casual conversations with strangers and like to work through their thoughts aloud—typically make the best process facilitators, embracing ambiguity and encouraging all participants to share their ideas. Introverts—people who prefer talking about their passions and work through their thoughts in their head before speaking—typically make the best content facilitators, developing deep expertise in the topic at hand and offering detailed information with less emphasis on discussion. Neither style is “better” than the other, and facilitators can and must be able to master both process and content. (Think of personality style like “handedness.” It’s much easier to write with your dominant hand, but with enough practice you can train yourself to write with the other.) Consider the following strategies to develop your less-dominant traits.

Natural tendency...	Try this...
I feel frustrated when participants don’t understand what seems so obvious to me.	Some people process information they hear easily, others need to see it in writing, and some need to be “hands on” with the information in order to understand it. Incorporate a mixture of lecture, handouts and activities to accommodate different learning styles.
It bothers me when people don’t seem actively engaged. I call on those who are not participating to make sure they are really paying attention.	Not everyone feels comfortable speaking in a large group or competing for air time with more talkative classmates. Use small group discussions and individual reflective exercises to enable these folks to get their ideas out.
I have so much material to get through that I can’t spare time for discussion.	Bombarding participants with information for long periods ensures they will tune out, turn off, and drop out. Alternating between lecture, discussions and activities allows time to process the information and refocus their minds.
Although I plan my sessions in advance, I don’t like to cut off discussion. We don’t always get through the material.	Young people learn a lot from their peers, and no facilitator should be tied to the lesson plan. Balance participants’ desire to share their views with the need to cover the topic in sufficient detail. Set time limits for each comment and put unrelated issues on a “parking lot”—a piece of flipchart paper—that you can return to if time permits.
I give straightforward feedback, especially when people are wrong, but sometimes participants misinterpret correction for criticism.	Dispelling mistruths and misunderstandings is important, but being singled out by an authority figure can often lead to hurt feelings and shut down further conversation. Rather than comment directly, express appreciation for the person’s contribution and open it up to the rest of the room: “Thanks for sharing, I’ve never heard that before. What does everyone else think about what Joe just said?” Usually the group will provide the right answer.

### What Is Your Training Style?<sup>2</sup>

#### PRESENTER

- Delivers detailed information to group
- Emphasizes structure and organization
- May feel uncomfortable with interaction or deviations from script

#### GUIDE

- Encourages interaction, but provides framework for session
- Walks participants through complex activities
- May focus on group at expense of individuals

#### COACH

- Cheerleader for individual participation
- Motivates and encourages easily
- May focus on individuals at expense of group

#### FACILITATOR

- Encourages active participation from all
- Listens well, and keeps conversation flowing
- May be too focused on discussion at expense of content



### STRATEGY #6: START WITH A BANG TO CREATE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING

Young people possess a natural suspicion of authority figures and fear appearing foolish in front of peers. They may resist sharing thoughts or asking questions, especially when first joining a program, and they may not engage fully until they view the facilitator as supportive and the classroom as a place free of ridicule or rejection. Fostering an environment in which individuals feel comfortable enough to open up requires deliberate and careful planning and practice.

Facilitators can do much to create a safe environment for learning by starting the session with a four step process known as **BANG**<sup>2</sup>:

- **B**uild interest in the session by grabbing attention from the start. Share a short article or anecdote that highlights why the topic is important. Use a provocative question or statement to stir a reaction. (“At least half of New York City’s teenagers who have left school and want to work cannot find a job. Today we’re going to talk about how you can be in the other half.”) This is essentially your sales pitch for the session—why should they “spend” their time and energy engaging with you?
- **A**sk what the participants know and what they want to know. Even if you already have a good understanding of their needs, a quick question (“Let’s see a show of hands of everyone who has written a resume before.”) will give you a sense of their experience and concerns, and convey the message that you welcome their input. For bigger or more difficult topics, collectively generating a list of expectations on a flipchart can promote engagement and help to manage expectations.
- **N**ote the ground rules and procedures. List the non-negotiable rules and administrative items upfront (“More than three unexcused absences will result in suspension,” “No cell phone use in the classroom,” “We will break for lunch from 12:30-1:30”) but solicit their suggestions when possible. The more say your participants have in establishing the ground rules, the more likely they will follow them. Write the rules on a flipchart page and hang them in the classroom as a reminder.
- **G**et them involved. Learning is not a passive, solitary experience, especially for young people. Use a fun icebreaker game related to the topic to get participants focused. Pair participants for five minutes with someone they don’t know and have them introduce their partner to the rest of the group.

Enthusiasm, energy and courteousness are contagious. Greeting participants individually with a smile when they walk in the classroom, saying “please” and “thank you” frequently, remembering names, sharing personal experiences (while maintaining professional boundaries, of course) and using affirmative non-verbal body language will create an emotional connection and model a positive set of behaviors.

### STRATEGY #7: MAKE LEARNING FUN AND INTERACTIVE

*“I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand” —Confucius*

Everyone, at some point in his or her life, has sat through a workshop so devoid of excitement that the clocks seemed to run backwards. Young people, especially, need more than just dry facts to learn. Incorporating stories that humanize and personalize abstract topics helps participants visualize concepts and more easily recall important points later. Use humor when appropriate if you are naturally humorous. (Be careful, though. Overdone, or done in the wrong way, humor can quickly backfire. Never make a joke that can be easily misinterpreted. Self-deprecation can elicit laughs, but making a participant the brunt of a joke will likely lead to awkwardness and resentment.) Use tools like stress balls, balloons, noise makers and beach balls to bring an element of fun to the classroom and reward performance. Discount stores sell many items that can be used as inexpensive props.

### THE SIX P’s of Presenting<sup>3</sup>

Six verbal factors influence how what you say comes across to your audience.

**PROJECTION** – Alternate volume to grab attention and express urgency.

**PITCH** – Monotone = boredom. Vary your pitch to maintain attention.

**PACE** – Change your speaking speed to build excitement, or emphasize key points.

**PAUSES** – They underscore ideas and allow for participant feedback.

**PRONUNCIATION** – Enunciate more clearly than in normal conversation.

**PHILLERS** – Avoid the distracting grunts, ums, ahs, and other noises that make a presenter sound uncertain.



Education theory has long recognized that people recall much more if they learn by doing rather than by simply seeing or hearing. Spice up workshops with learning-based activities, preferably ones that the participants themselves have a role in leading. Collectively working through issues develops greater understanding and refines the critical thinking, problem solving, and interpersonal skills essential for the workplace. While the optimal balance between lecture (content) and activity (process) varies depending on the topic, facilitators should strive for at least one to two interactive activities per hour. Build in time after each activity for a learning review to reiterate the central purpose of the lesson and clarify any lingering questions.

### TRY THESE ACTIVITIES TO LIVEN UP A WORKSHOP

- **BALL TOSS** Write terms related to a topic on a beach ball that participants toss around. Whoever catches the ball explains one of the terms. A great learning review.
- **BRAINSTORMING** Groups of participants develop a list of all the possible ideas they can come up with about a topic and then present their best ideas to the rest of the room this generates a large number of ideas quickly and shares group knowledge.
- **BUZZ GROUPS** An approach to debates that gets everyone involved. Pair up participants and have each person take one side of a controversial statement. ("I should be able to wear what I want to an interview. If an employer won't hire me because of the way I look, then I don't want to work there anyway.") For three minutes, the two partners "buzz" about a topic to get them thinking and talking. Bring the class back together, placing the "pros" on one side of the room and the "antis" on the other, and hold a large group debate on the topic. For a competitive spin, appoint one or two judges to decide which side makes the most compelling arguments.
- **CASE STUDIES** Prepare a realistic, detailed description of a situation related to the workshop topic, and "hire" small groups as consultants to identify the challenges and develop recommendations for improvement.
- **ENERGIZERS** Fun and upbeat, energizer activities revive lagging energy. Sample energizers include:
  - **BALLOON KEEP-UP** Groups of five join hands in a circle to keep a balloon aloft using only the body part the facilitator shouts out (knees, elbows, nose, etc.) Breaking hands or using another body part eliminates that group. The last group with the balloon in the air wins.
  - **SIMON SAYS** This classic children's game works well in a classroom setting. In rapid succession, the facilitator issues a series of commands. Anyone who acts on a command not preceded by "Simon Says" is disqualified. Example: "Simon Says reach for the sky / Simon Says touch your toes / Simon Says stand up / Now touch your nose / Simon Says look to the right / Simon Says look to the left / Simon Says point to the sky / Point to the floor."
  - **WORD PICTURE PUZZLES:** Small groups are given 10 minutes to solve a list of word picture puzzles such as:

HEAD  
HEELS

(Answer: "Head over heels"). Dozens of puzzles are available from <http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/>

### TRY THIS: BINGO Icebreaker

To help participants get to know each other, create a BINGO card that includes twenty-four common characteristics, such as "has more than two brothers or sisters," "has travelled to more than five states," and "was born in February." (Online BINGO generators like [www.teach-nology.com](http://www.teach-nology.com) make creating cards a breeze.) Give participants ten minutes to "fill in" as many boxes as possible by finding others who meet each characteristic and writing that person's name in the box. After ten minutes, award prizes to those who have managed to create a horizontal, vertical or diagonal line, those who have made an X or T, and the person(s) with the most boxes filled in.



- **LINE UP** This is especially useful for practicing interview skills. Divide the class into two parallel lines facing each other at arm's length so that each person is directly across from someone else. One side (Side A) plays the part of a job seeker, the other side (Side B) is an employer. Side A has 60 seconds to answer a common interview question that the facilitator announces. After 60 seconds, the facilitator calls time and switches the roles so that Side A is now the employer while Side B members are the job seekers, and repeats the activity with a different question. After 60 seconds, the facilitator calls time again and leads a group discussion about what worked or did not work about how people answered the questions.
- **POSTERS** Participants create artistic posters using colorful markers and poster board to convey a message or summarize focal points. Turn it into a competition by having each team "pitch" its poster to an impartial judge who will choose the most compelling one.
- **ROLE PLAY** Develop short scenarios that two or more participants act out in front of the room without any prior preparation. (For example, one person is a worker who shows up an hour late due again to an ongoing child care issue. The other is the employer threatening to terminate the employee unless he or she can come up with a way not to be late any more.) After five minutes, ask the rest of the class to applaud the actors and provide feedback.
- **SIMULATIONS** Transform the classroom environment to represent a real work environment. (For example, to practice customer service get an old cash register and have several participants act out how to handle a complaining customer who is holding up the checkout line.) The rest of the room provides feedback after the simulation.
- **SKITS** Small groups develop and deliver short presentations—preferably using props to increase entertainment value—to demonstrate skill or knowledge.
- **SONGWRITING** Small groups write and perform a song that demonstrates their perspective or understanding of the workshop topic. (For example, "Hire Me Please" sung to the tune of The Beatles "Let It Be.") An especially fun activity for young people.
- **TUG OF WAR** Similar to a debate, this activity elicits arguments for or against a controversial idea. Divide the group into two teams at opposite ends of the room, with one to three participants positioned in the middle of the room to act as the "rope." Assign each team one side of the issue, with five minutes to brainstorm the best arguments in favor of their position. Each team will then have 15-20 seconds to "tug on the rope" by pitching one of their arguments to the person(s) in the middle. If the argument is compelling, the rope takes a step toward that side. The other team then gets 15-20 seconds to either make one of their arguments or refute the first side's argument. Alternate in rapid succession until each side has at least five turns. At the end, see where the rope ends up. Discuss which arguments were most effective and why.

### IN SUM

Done well, creative facilitation enables an instructor to connect with and motivate even the most seemingly disengaged young people. Mistakes will be made, confidence may waiver from day to day, and job seekers may challenge you, but the positive examples you set and your willingness to explore ideas will transform your classroom into a place of learning and growth.

<sup>1</sup>Michael Clark, "Strength-Based Practice: The ABC's of Working With Adolescents Who Don't Want To Work With You," Federal Probation Quarterly, June 1998, 62 #1, 46-53.

<sup>2-4</sup>Adapted from Elaine Biech, Training For Dummies, 2005, pp. 158-159, 166-167, 205. This book, chock full of great advice and concrete examples, is an essential resource for new trainers.

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This publication series was made possible through the generous support of The Pinkerton Foundation.

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