

FACILITATION TIPS AND GUIDANCE

by Margaret Doyle, ADR consultant

Before the meeting:

Establish the objectives of the meeting:

- What do you want to achieve?
- Does everyone agree on objectives?
- Establish and agree an agenda.

Decide on the parameters of the meeting. Is it possible to make a decision at the end of the meeting? Or is the meeting intended to prepare the ground for more work that will ultimately lead to a decision?

Agree on a venue, time, length of meeting, and who will attend.

- » *Ensure that the people attending have the authority to make an agreement, if that is one of the objectives.*

Agree on the remit/role of the facilitator. Is this person:

- a neutral presence who does not participate?
- acting as a chair to run the meeting and follow agenda?
- taking charge of ensuring the objectives are met?

Agree if there will be a record of the meeting, and if so who will be taking/distributing notes.

- » *Note-taker is a sensitive position. Everyone must trust that the note-taker is fair, objective and accurate. Otherwise you might need another meeting to sort out disputes about the notes!*

Is the meeting a confidential one? There are many aspects to confidentiality, and these will need to be clarified beforehand.

- Is everything that is said at the meeting confidential, or only parts of the meeting?
- Will others not at the meeting (such as other members of a committee) need to be told about it?
- How widely will the notes be circulated?

What materials might be needed?

- » *Sometimes a flip chart can be very useful to gather views and provide a focus for the parties.*

Are there any special needs of parties that need to be considered in choosing a venue, time or place?

- » *Be sure to set the length of time for the meeting so people can plan appropriately and be available for the entire meeting.*

Are there any documents that need distributing before the meeting? Make sure everyone has copies sufficiently in advance.

Is there any other preparation that the parties need to do before the meeting?

- » *Sometimes it helps if parties spend time preparing their 'opening statement' and considering what their best- and worst-case scenarios are.*

At the start of the meeting:

Arrange the room in a comfortable way.

- » *Some people like tables. Others prefer more informal arrangements of chairs, with no table.*

Have copies of any agendas or other papers on hand.

Agree on ground rules, and if desired write them on a flip chart.

- Will the meeting be confidential (see above)?
- How will interruptions be dealt with?
- Will there be a particular structure to the meeting?
- Are breaks planned for?

» *Ground rules are merely a way of setting out a shared understanding for how the meeting will be conducted. They help the facilitator keep the discussion on track.*

Check that everyone is ready to start.

- » *Remind people to turn off their mobiles!*

During the meeting:

Have everyone introduce themselves. Sometimes it helps to have people say what their role is.

- » *Doing introductions is important even if everyone already knows each other. It reaffirms people's willingness to be present and gets the meeting started.*

Among the tasks for the facilitator are to:

- Remind people why they are there.
- Set out the agenda for the meeting and remind people of the time limits and the ground rules.

» *Meetings should always have a beginning and end. Think beforehand what the end will be: Is it simply when you reach the time limit? Or is there a 'shape' to the meeting that requires planning and pacing?*

- Ask each party in turn to take a few minutes to explain their view of the situation.

» *Make sure each side gets the same amount of time!*

- Make a note on the flipchart of any important points – eg points of agreement or common ground, or points that need clarifying.
- Make sure that each party has heard what the other side has said.

- # Sometimes the facilitator summarising what someone has said helps the other side hear and takes the heat out of an angry comment or exchange.
- Keep people on track and following the agenda.
- » If another issue arises, check out with everyone that they are happy to add this to the agenda.
- Be fair and treat people in a balanced impartial way.
- » Consider your body language and eye contact. Little things like this can seem insignificant to you but can be very noticeable to the parties.
- Warn people when time is running out and helps steer them to a conclusion.

See the 'Problem-tackling sequence' attached (from Widdicombe, Meetings that Work, 2000).

Some techniques for helping people to problem-solve:

Brainstorming – a way to generate lots of ideas, some of which will be feasible and some not (flipchart paper is useful for this)

Separating the people from the problem – keep the focus on the issues and problems, not on the personalities involved.

What-ifs – asking a 'what if' question helps people think about options (e.g. 'What if you don't reach agreement here – what will happen?').

Generalising problems – sometimes pointing out that 'this happens in other situations' or 'one way this has been dealt with by other groups is...' helps depersonalise a problem and also reminds people that others have faced similar situations.

Focus on interests – ultimatums can sometimes mask needs. Ask 'Why would that resolve things for you?' and 'What would that achieve?' as a way to see if there's another way to meet those needs.

At the end of a meeting:

If there is an agreement, check whether the parties want this written down. If so, who will write it up, check it, get it signed, and distribute it?

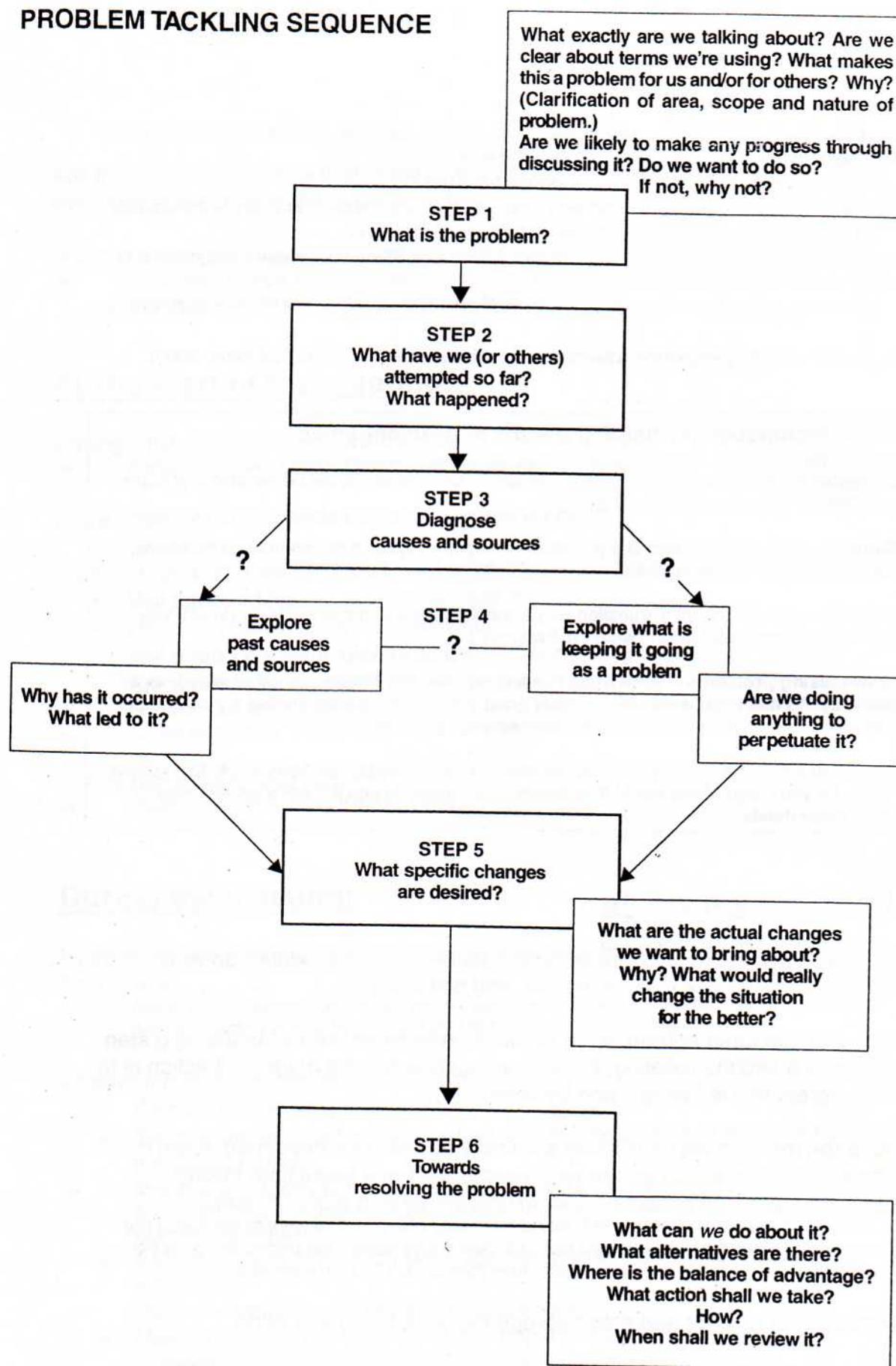
Sum up what has been agreed, what remains unresolved, and what the next step is (eg is there a second meeting, a letter, an approach to be made?). If action is to be taken, agree who is taking it and by when.

Conclude the meeting with a positive summary of what has happened. Even if there hasn't been an actual agreement, people will have spent time talking constructively about the issues and so will not be leaving empty-handed.

- » A study of mediation (Genn, 1998) found that many disputes that went to mediation but remained unresolved were settled later. Mediation had helped the parties focus on the problems and possible solutions, which they then worked out on their own.

Thank people for coming and acknowledge the work they have done.

PROBLEM TACKLING SEQUENCE



From Catherine Widdicombe, Meetings that Work – A Practical Guide to Teamworking in Groups (Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, 2000)