

ORGANIC
Seed
ALLIANCE

Facilitator
Handbook
2025

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Why a Facilitator Training at Organic Seed Alliance

Organic Seed Alliance delivers research, education, advocacy, and outreach related to seed production, plant breeding, seed stories, and seed policy. As conveners we seek to create a long table, including a diverse social and political spectrum of those working in organic seed. We invite rich and often nuanced discussions that many feel passionate about, something we see as critical for co-creating a future of organic seed that works for everyone. Because of this, facilitators at our events are often tasked with balancing a wide array of perspectives, experiences, and ways of knowing. We've created this training in an attempt to help facilitators understand and iterate on the shared culture of OSA, in addition to offering some practical frameworks for how to build a strong foundation for your own particular flavor of facilitation.

Facilitators in food systems are frequently called upon to steward group dialogue and decision-making. For some, this community-building effort is joyful and they feel confident and skilled in this role. For others, facilitation feels like a departure from their core skillset, or even a distraction from accomplishing the tasks at hand. This resource is designed to aid those on both sides of the spectrum, with a focus on giving you the tools and information you need to create a culture of inclusion, clarity, and authenticity in spaces where weighty conversations about food, land, and the future are held.

This handbook is intended to be used for both in-person as well as online gatherings. These are not separated, as the majority of the content is applicable for both situations. The strategies you use for groups will be similar, but the application adapted for that particular environment. Additional information about best practices for online sessions can be found in an addendum.

What does it mean to be a facilitator?

Role of Facilitator

“Facilitators exist wherever learning happens. And great facilitation involves getting clear on what you’re doing with your groups, why you’re doing it, and how to do it with purpose and intention.” -Beth Cougler Blom

Facilitators support groups in achieving their purpose for gathering. To do this successfully, the person holding the role of facilitator must weave together logistical planning as well as social-relational skills. Attention to both components help create a physical, intellectual, and emotional container that brings ease to the work of being human in community. In a professional or workplace setting, this often looks like working with groups in meetings or conferences to support learning, build shared understanding, navigate change, or make a decision.

Each facilitator develops their own approach based on their experiences of groups, culture, and where their collaborative skills shine. There are as many different approaches to facilitation as there are facilitators. This handbook is intended to be a guide; enough information to get someone started successfully, but inclusive of concepts that facilitators of all experience levels will find useful.

What do facilitators do?

Whatever the goals of the facilitated session, there are some foundational elements to the role of facilitators. For the purposes of this handbook, they are divided into two sections: logistical concerns, and social-relational considerations. These two components are interlocked, and the success in one supports the success of the other.

Managing Logistics

Before the Meeting:

Orient yourself to the purpose of gathering. What outcomes is the group hoping to achieve? Facilitators may receive a complete agenda from colleagues, collaboratively create one, or be fully responsible for designing the agenda. In any of these cases, it is worthwhile to have your own notes and individual preparations.

During the Meeting:

Open with a warm welcome to everyone, and a review of the goal and logistics of the time together. This includes:

- Introductions- yourself, speakers, support roles, interpreters
- Repeat title and give a very brief overview
- Affirm the purpose “What we hope you’ll get out of this...”
- Talk about shared agreements and group norms

End by thanking everyone for their contributions, and any announcements as people transition out of the space. If information and resources were collected, make a plan for how they will be managed and distributed.

Relationship Building (Social-emotional considerations)

The ultimate goal of facilitators is to create a space where participants feel seen, heard, and valued for both their presence and contributions. Spending time to co-create the culture will create ease in reaching the group goals. Taking the time to integrate (or at least reflect) on what

has been accomplished builds relationships between participants and helps us all in carrying forward the gathering's momentum.

Before the Meeting:

Make a plan for creating an inclusive space. We all benefit when a plurality of voices contribute to discussions and decision-making. It is the facilitator and participants shared responsibility to create an inclusive space, but the facilitators hold more power in making this possible. Creating a culture of inclusivity and belonging is a muscle to maintain and develop, rather than a destination where one might arrive. Imperfect practice and commitment to ongoing learning will grow your skills more quickly than getting stalled in attempts towards perfect action.

In this plan, consider:

- **Ways your own identity, lived experiences, and social roles may influence how you interact with others, and how others perceive you.** Cultivating an awareness of the perspectives you carry will help you in responding to group needs. It is not possible to sever our personal identities from our facilitation. Because of that, true neutrality in facilitation is unlikely. However, in recognizing one's own point of view, the facilitator is more likely to make appropriate accommodations.
- **Developing an agenda that is specific, but flexible.** Creating discussion questions and group activities in advance allows for opportunity to design for different learning and contribution styles. Be prepared to adapt: Sometimes necessary and important conversations arise that are not the core discussion or outcomes. You may need to make a decision as to whether that conversation or the original agenda is more important.

During the Meeting:

Ways you can demonstrate an inclusive culture in your interactions as the facilitator.

- Practice inviting different voices into participation.
- Practice elevating different kinds of knowledge. In the US context, Academia is one kind of knowing, often exalted above others. Practice ways of proactively inviting other types of knowledge. This includes practical experience, field work, cultural knowledge and wisdom, lived experience amongst others.
- Practice awareness of the physical space, including yourself, other people, and physical elements of the space you are in. This includes awareness of accessibility needs.
- Practice curiosity and openness in your questions and reflections.
- Practice appreciation - find genuine ways to complement the group as individuals and collective

- Practice being yourself. The participants will see and respond positively to authenticity.

Pay attention to the experience of the participants.

- It is ok to pause and take a quick scan before deciding how to direct the agenda or respond to participants. Notice body language. Don't be afraid to ask directly and involve them in decision-making. A quick thumbs-up/thumbs can help you take the temperature of the room.
- Create opportunities for reflection and integration. Especially in situations where collective learning or decision-making is the focus, this helps carry forward the learning and momentum beyond the program end. Depending on the time available, facilitators can call on a limited number of people to share, or create opportunities for everyone to contribute.

Q. How does your social positioning (experiences of race, gender, class, culture, education, ethnicity, occupation etc) influence how you interact with groups? If you need help getting started, think about a specific situation and reflect on the dynamics specific to that moment.

Q. How am I going to demonstrate an inclusive culture in my facilitation? Where do I need practice and support to grow my skillset?

Q. What resources already exist at Organic Seed Alliance to support me in building an inclusive culture? How can I include them in the preparation or proceedings?

Strategies for Successful Facilitation

Designing activities and discussion questions

Thoughtful design of discussion and activity flow is the key to supporting your group in reaching their goals for meeting. If you are leading a panel discussion, what kinds of information, opportunities or perspectives will be most satisfying for the audience? If you're facilitating a group discussion, think about what outcomes will be satisfying for the group. Are they trying to reach a decision? Are they working to broaden perspectives and increase understanding? Have they come to this group with the goal of building interpersonal connection and trust?

You'll select your activities and questions based on the goals of the group. See the resources section for more references to help you design meaningful participation as you work toward the desired group outcome.

Keeping the group on track

- Communicate clear instructions for each section of the agenda. If possible, have these written where they can be referenced in addition to giving verbal instructions.
- Be mindful of the time, or delegate time-keeping to a colleague or participant
- Guide the flow of discussion with open questions Open questions draw out description, reflection, or analysis. They invite more than a "yes or no" answer.
- Be ready to redirect if the group gets too far off topic. Here is some language you may use to redirect a group and get a conversation back on track.
 - "This is a really interesting conversation, but slightly out of our scope today. Could we relate it back to the topic at hand?"
 - "Could we put this conversation in a "parking lot" in our notes for another time?"
 - "Staying mindful of time, are we ready to move on?"
 - It's ok to pause, but stop and get group alignment for significant changes in the day's agenda or end time.

Soliciting analysis and reflection

There will be times when it is most appropriate for the facilitator to summarize and reflect back their observations, but it is encouraged to invite participants to contribute in this way. This can look like:

- Creating an “artifact” together that reflects key themes, perspectives, or decisions reached. Don’t be afraid to get creative. The act of making it is more important than the final product.
- Collaborating on a poster which reflects one of the following: a short list of themes, remaining questions, collective or individual “aha” moments.

Adapting to group size

In a conference setting, you cannot know how many people will attend each session. What do you do if the group is larger or smaller than expected? Planning ahead and having a few contingencies in mind can be helpful when adapting to group size. There is no magic group size. The right number of people is determined by the scale of the question/discussion and the amount of time allocated to get there.

It is good practice to reflect on what outcomes you are hoping to reach with the group. Are you looking to build deeper relationships between group members? Smaller groups leave more time for introductions and nuanced discussions. Alternatively, if you are looking to build group alignment, it may serve to have a larger group size. As a general guideline, a minimum of three participants and a maximum of eight will work for most cases.

If the group is smaller than expected:

- More personal elements like introductions
- Give chances to share stories, answer each others’ questions
- Potentially shift the structure from small groups to whole-group

If the group is larger than expected

- Give participants more time to transition between activities
- Limit live participation- “Let’s hear from 2 or 3 people on this...”
- Consider adapting discussion and activity group size
- Share the responsibility:
 - Ask for participants to help distill discussions in small groups to come back to the larger community
 - Groups can be larger, but include roles such as timekeeper, notetaker, reporter (shares summary back), or other needs

Holding participants to group agreements

Shared agreements are a foundational tool for helping groups navigate collaboration with more ease and shared humanity. Below are the current shared agreements used by Organic Seed Alliance that were developed during the 2022 Virtual Organic Seed Growers Conference:

- Speak only for ourselves, and make space for others to speak
- Limit multi-tasking
- Be aware of who is missing from each conversation
- Remember that no one has a monopoly on truth, and everyone's experience is valid
- Critique ideas, not people
- Listen to our bodies and tend to their needs
- Give some grace for technical and logistical difficulties
- Give some grace for human imperfection

How much time in the agenda you give to going over group agreements is dependent on several factors, including the familiarity of the group with one another, the potential for disagreement and conflict, and preexisting power dynamics and differentials amongst group members. If there are large gaps in cultural, political, social power and experience across the group, then it is more important to spend additional time going over agreements and how they will be enforced. The investment of time will help the group navigate challenges that may emerge.

For example, at the opening of an all-day gathering, the facilitator might spend 5-10 minutes to create or review shared agreements under which they are operating that day. Ask the participants to make any additions they need to invite their full participation, but don't linger beyond the allotted time- this is a place a group can get stuck. Consider asking the participants to clap once, snap, or give verbal indication to practice these shared agreements as this can strengthen the sense of shared responsibility to positive group culture.

For smaller group discussions you may not need to review the list in full, but it is best practice for the facilitator to remind the group that they have shared agreements that will guide the time together. If possible, put these in a place easily referenced by all participants. Online, this could look like posting the agreements in the chat. In-person, hanging them on a wall in each room.

Q. What agreements do you need to feel welcome and included in a group?

Attending to power dynamics

Power dynamics are always present in groups, both overtly and covertly. Think about cliques, assumed allegiances, or celebrities might show up in your group. All of these have the potential to impact the ways participants relate to one another. Building your awareness of power dynamics will improve your capacity to support a group through collective challenges.

Forms of Power | Human Impact Partners

Positional	Comes from organizational authority or position – often overlooked by people with the power, rarely forgotten by those without it
Referred	Comes from connections to others (e.g. a staff member without formal positional power but who has known the ED for years)
Expert	Comes from wisdom, knowledge, experience & skills (e.g. someone who is widely respected because of their skills as an organizer)
Obstructive	Stems from the ability to coerce or block – whether implicit, threatened, or demonstrated. Those without other sources of power may depend on it. Many activists are experts in its use.
Personal	The manifestation of an individual’s energy, vision, ability to communicate, capacity to influence, emotional intelligence, psychological savvy, etc.
Collaborative	Our ability to join our energies in partnership with others in pairs, teams, organizations, communities, coalitions, and movements
Institutional	Economic, legal, and political power directly wielded by institutions – whether a corporation, police department, or your own organization. It exists apart from the individuals who work there at any one time, i.e. brand, membership, skills, etc.
Cultural	The cultural norms and conditioning regarding race, class, sexual orientation, gender identification and age that accrue power and privilege to the dominant group... from the perspective of oppressed peoples, is also a consciousness of community or culture that serves to empower
Structural	Power covertly or implicitly exercised through the dominant institutions of society (e.g. resistance to alternative medicine from the AMA and insurance providers or racism expressed and maintained through structures like red-lining by lending institutions)

Table adapted from [Activities to Develop Your Power-Building Analysis by Human Impact Partners](#)

Q. Identify what types of power you hold in the space. Facilitators, through the role that they occupy in the room, carry some amount of structural, institutional, and positional forms of power over the participants. To what degree each of these apply to you?

Q. Identify what types of power are likely to be held by participants in the group. Which of these types of power are dominant in the communities you are working with?

One strategy that organizations can use to account for power and inequities in their decision making is called an equity filter. This is a tool or framework to evaluate policies, programs, decisions, or resource allocations through an equity lens. Through the use of this tool, organizations can improve their capacity to evaluate if their actions and initiatives support fairness, inclusion, and justice, particularly for systemically disenfranchised and excluded communities. Organic Seed Alliance is currently utilizing the [Equity Filter created by the WA Food Policy Forum](#).

Equity Filter Questions:

1. What is the proposal under consideration?
2. What are the desired results and outcomes?
3. Who is likely to benefit from, who is likely to be burdened by, and who might be left out of this proposal? Consider racial, ethnic, or economic disparity.

4. How and to what extent might the proposal reduce inequities experienced by the populations identified in question #3?

5. What perspectives and data does the Organic Seed Alliance Forum need to consider to ensure the proposed action will advance equity?

6. What unintended consequences may result from this proposal that could affect equity? Consider to what extent the proposal advantages people and/or groups who have traditionally benefited from privilege.

7. What feedback from this exercise about opportunities to advance equity should be shared with those who will be implementing the proposed action?

Responding to Conflict

Conflict is a healthy part of being complex humans together. Not inherently destructive; it can drive growth and deepen understanding. Conflict can become destructive when attacks become personal, when power dynamics are unchecked, or when people who are engaged in or observing the conflict are not able to consent to, and mentally prepare for, their role. The ideas and scripts in this section will help you notice and respond to tension, conflict and act to mitigate harm.

Three Ways to prepare yourself to respond to conflict:

1. Practice recognizing and attending to discomfort in your body
2. Role-play interruptions and redirections, build your confidence through repetition.
3. Cultivate awareness of your blindspots, personal power, and biases. How can you be prepared to disrupt those tendencies and create an inclusive space?

Strategies for addressing tension and conflict:

- When someone breaks an agreement, kindly remind them of that agreement
- Listen for grains of truth or resonance in what disagreeing people say. Point out overlaps.
- Invite the group into practicing curiosity and listening to hear rather than respond
- Name the power dynamics you are witnessing, ask the group if there are others
- Elevate personal experience over personal opinion. Acknowledge that overlapping truths are not only possible, but likely.
- Practice de-escalation
 - Keep your calm. Acknowledge that people feel passionate about this subject “I can tell there is a lot of passion about this subject. Thank you so much for sharing your honest feelings.”

- Check in with the group “This seems like a contentious topic, how do we feel about continuing this conversation?”
- When appropriate, support the group in moving on. Not infrequently, the conflict is not resolvable within the scope of your meeting time and must be set aside for later. Here are two examples of how to acknowledge the challenge and advance in the agenda without dismissing the importance of what has arisen:
 - “Let’s document this question on [insert relevant tool] and invite other perspectives from the conference.”
 - “Let’s put this question in our notes, and we can follow up with attendees after the session, to see how we want to continue this conversation.”

Your first priority is not to resolve conflict. Your first priority is the safety of those who stand to lose from an imbalance of power. Secondarily is your responsibility to the shared experience of the participants.

Q. Which strategies for responding to tension and conflict are you most comfortable using? Which ones feel outside your skillset or capacity? What are steps I can take as a facilitator to get support with the ones I am still learning?

Strategies for mitigating harm during conflict

- Re-iterate expectations for respectful dialogue
- Point out when people are speaking in a way that erases the experiences of others
- “Let’s speak from our own experience in this conversation”
- “Others might not experience what you’re describing in the same way. Let’s leave space for that.”
- Model “From my perspective”, “My thought is...” in your guidance of the group.
- Do not ask individuals to speak on behalf of their affinity or identity group.
- It is ok to end a session that is getting harmful

Do not downplay the impact of or apologize on behalf of someone who has caused harm.

Your job is to support the safety of a person who has been harmed by validating their experience, even if you believe you would react differently in their shoes. Repair is something that needs to happen between the person who was hurt and the person who caused the harm (with a mediator if needed). Saying “they didn’t mean it that way” or “that’s just the way he is” does not comfort the person in pain, it invalidates their experience. Do not put yourself in a position of explaining away a harmful action.

Addendum: Special considerations for facilitating in remote & online environments

Below are some best practices compiled from experience in hosting online conferences and meetings.

Work from Shared Documents

Remote collaboration between hosts, facilitators, tech support, and others working to support the participant experience is smoothest when working from a shared document. Ideally, this should include the tasks, timing, relevant links and notes for each of these roles. Instructions for the chat are ready to copy and paste, timing of sections is clear, and you know who is responsible for what section.

Not only does this make for more seamless co-management of the virtual space, it also reduces the stress of technical challenges. Should someone in a leadership role get disconnected, this makes it easier for someone to pick up their work and ensure a smooth transition while they work to get re-connected.

Adapt the agenda for remote and online environments

If you design (or at least adapt) your activities and discussion for the group with remote participation in mind, online sessions have the same opportunities for connection and shared experience as in-person gatherings. Instead of focusing on what is not possible, reflect on what kinds of activities flourish in online environments.

For example, the practice of chat cascades (ie asking all participants to respond to a prompt in the chat simultaneously) allows everyone to see the responses in a much swifter manner than verbalizing our answers in a circle. Similarly, using an online whiteboard program like Mural or Miro allows for different small groups (working in breakout rooms) to make additions simultaneously without their discussions interfering with one another. Even more than in in-person sessions, it can be helpful to design an agenda with a mix of discussion, engaged participation, and solo reflection. By switching up the ways to participate, you will keep the groups attention and create a more inclusive path toward full participation.

If groups are larger than 6-8, consider having a tech person to assist, even if you are very familiar with the technology. This will help keep the session moving at a good pace, and gives participants someone to interface with when they run into technical difficulties.

Pay attention to the physical experience of being focused on a screen.

Acknowledge that this is still a physical experience, even if we are not in a shared physical space. Invite the participants to tend to their physical needs, ie hydration, stretch breaks.

Different organizations and groups have different norms for cameras being on or off. Be explicit about the norm in your group, and name why that is the practice you are following. Invite your participants to act in concert with that norm, but it is not generally productive to try and enforce it directly. Trust that participants know what is best for their situation.

Think about your environment as well. Are you somewhere where you are less likely to be interrupted? Do you have headphones to minimize background noise? Do you need to put up a virtual background to minimize visual distractions?

Working with Technology

Setting up your screen view: While the decision on how to set up your screen view will vary depending on your needs, it can be a good idea to pick a format that allows you to see presenters and participants at the same time. This creates opportunity for you to witness and attend to their reactions and needs.

Using collaborative platforms: When using online tools for collaboration, like google docs, Mural, Miro, google slides, don't forget to orient people to the tool and how you will be using it. Even if every participant is familiar with the platform (like google docs), reviewing the features and how you will be using them is a good practice. Ideally, you and the tech person come up with a backup plan if someone is having trouble accessing the tool/platform. Ex. If someone is having trouble adding sticky notes to a Mural board, could they type their comments in the chat and have the tech support person or another participant add them on their behalf?

Breakout rooms can be a great option for facilitating group discussion with a large number of people in an online space. Consider whether you want to choose a format where you pre-select groups for participants, or whether you want a set up that allows for them to choose their own room. The former is more useful for structured small group discussion, the latter is handy if you need participants to self-organize by information you may not be privy to (ie: breaking into affinity groups). Setting up breakout rooms is a great task to hand off to tech support or another colleague in the background as you facilitate reflections and discussion.

Closing

We hope that this training and the associated resources give you a solid jumping off point for your facilitator journey, and look forward to developing this resource as we weave our collective visions for organic seed. When stepping into the role of facilitator we will be tasked with confronting not only our own biases and experiences, but also supporting others in all the myriad ways they show up. While not easy work, we believe it is essential to be able to fulfil our mission of putting the power of seed into the hands of growers. We're so grateful you are showing up with us. If you have any questions feel free to reach out to info@seedalliance.org.

Additional Resources

Agenda & Activity Design Resources:

- [Creative activities from PYE Global](#) to invoke imagination and out-of-the-box thinking. There is a mix of online, in-person, and those which can be adapted for either.
- Interactive microstructures from [Liberating Structures](#) to support moving a group rapidly through decision-making

Developing strong discussion and reflection questions:

Questions that create possibilities from [adrienne maree brown](#):

- Which organizations do you/we look up to?
- Is our tendency toward reform or revolution?
- What does our community need most right now, and how do we know?
- What are we uniquely suited for?
- Is this a moment for intentional adaptation? Towards what?
- What is the most elegant next step?
- Which ancestors guide our/ your work?
- What is the furthest vision you can imagine for your/our success?
- What is the best failure you've experienced and what did you learn?

ORID - A Deep Democracy Approach

Designed for moving groups through stages of conversation toward a desired decision, resolution or next step.

ORID	What this explores	How to
Objective/ observed (1 question)	The facts that the group knows about the topic	What's one thing you have seen or heard about this topic? What's a word, phrase or image that stands out to you?
Reflective (1-2 questions)	How people feel about the topic/ personal connections	What does this remind you of? What's exciting, concerning or surprising?
Interpretive/ intellectual (1-5 questions)	Analysis of the topic, pros/cons, emerging insight	What the big questions? Options? Solutions? Pros/cons What insights are coming into focus? Is there a different perspective in the room? And another? Who else can relate to this?
Decisional (1-2 questions)	The takeaway, summary, decision or response	What are we concluding here? What questions are still open? What are we hearing about how to proceed? What will we take with up back to our community? *gather suggestions from dissenting voices and add to the conclusion/decision

Tools to support you in building a culture of inclusion:

Learn more about the [Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture](#) to better recognize and interrupt moments when harm is occurring.

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Positional	Comes from organizational authority or position – often overlooked by people with the power, rarely forgotten by those without it
Referred	Comes from connections to others (e.g. a staff member without formal positional power but who has known the ED for years)
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Obstructive	Stems from the ability to coerce or block – whether implicit, threatened, or

	demonstrated. Those without other sources of power may depend on it. Many activists are experts in its use.
Personal	The manifestation of an individual's energy, vision, ability to communicate, capacity to influence, emotional intelligence, psychological savvy, etc.
Collaborative	Our ability to join our energies in partnership with others in pairs, teams, organizations, communities, coalitions, and movements
Institutional	Economic, legal, and political power directly wielded by institutions – whether a corporation, police department, or your own organization. It exists apart from the individuals who work there at any one time, i.e. brand, membership, skills, etc.
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Equity Filter Questions from [Washington State Food Policy Forum](#).

1. What is the proposal under consideration?
2. What are the desired results and outcomes?
3. Who is likely to benefit from, who is likely to be burdened by, and who might be left out of this proposal? Consider racial, ethnic, or economic disparity.
4. How and to what extent might the proposal reduce inequities experienced by the populations identified in question #3?
5. What perspectives and data does the Organic Seed Alliance Forum need to consider to ensure the proposed action will advance equity?
6. What unintended consequences may result from this proposal that could affect equity? Consider to what extent the proposal advantages people and/or groups who have traditionally benefited from privilege.

7. What feedback from this exercise about opportunities to advance equity should be shared with those who will be implementing the proposed action?

Deepen your skills:

- Learn and practice skills for building a positive relationship with Indigenous peoples through kinSHIFT.ca workshops
- Join [Toolsi](#) with Nadia Chaney, where you will find a mix of paid and free trainings to grow your facilitation confidence and toolkit
- Read the [Guide to Community-based Facilitation](#), a free resource for those interested in using facilitation to advance community interests.

Author's note: This handbook is the result of both an initial vision and the ongoing work that has shaped it over time. About half of this handbook was pulled from an earlier edition authored by Kitt Healy of Healy Consulting for the 2022 Organic Seed Growers Conference. Three years later, I have reworked, expanded, and refined the content to become a reference guide for many kinds of events at Organic Seed Alliance. My gratitude to Kitt Healy for the opportunity to build on your work.

Rhys-Thorvald Hansen | [Parallax 49 LLC](#)

