

“I see we have a question...”

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Actually, we have a lot of questions. But those are for you, the facilitator.

And what do facilitators do? Facilitators ask questions. We ask questions to stimulate critical thinking about a topic, process or situation. We ask questions to challenge deep-rooted beliefs such as, “I got ___ guys who got my back” or “Our sisterhood is the best on campus” or “That’s always the way we’ve done it.” We ask questions to challenge cultural norms without challenging individuals. We ask questions for practical reasons. These questions allow us to engage many individuals instead of the usual three or four designated spokespersons for a group. We can draw out opinions from quiet people and temper commentary from first responders who often speak in generalized declaratives. Through questions, we can encourage and support subtly and guide discussion without dictating or controlling.

But first, let’s understand three things about facilitation.

- 1) Facilitation is usually messy. Facilitation isn’t for those who want to make a neat, clean, “no-unused-parts” presentation with two learning outcomes and four secondary points. Nope. With facilitation you have outcomes...but the pathway or road to those outcomes can be difficult, circuitous, and bumpy.
- 2) Facilitation is challenging. This is the fun part, but also the difficult part. You don’t know what a member of your audience will say, or how, or when. You’re also relying upon non-verbals including what I term “the windshield wiper movement” – the side-to-side glances for affirmation, conclusion, or “Should I answer that?” You may hear answers that are non-responsive or express frustration or anger that need to be addressed, as well as thoughtful and articulate responses which allow you to move forward.
- 3) Box up your ego. Use duct tape to seal the box and leave it outside the room. You won’t need it and it will get in the way. A presentation implies control – you know where the presentation is going and at what speed and when you will finish. Facilitation? You may be able to guide – but not control – some of the dialogue. You may need to drop back a step or two before proceeding, or you may accelerate to a key outcome without establishing a firm foundation. It all depends.

And how about those questions?

Let me ask you a few.

Who will participate in your meeting? Where will it be held? When? And what are the outcomes that have been agreed upon in advance? Knowing those things helps you lead, prod, encourage, or sometimes just allow the conversation to head in a particular direction.

Two things we need to keep in mind:

- 1) Our undergraduates are professional listeners. They spend much of their time in college listening to other people tell them things. Depending upon a host of factors, they may not have the opportunity to interact. But they all know the feeling of someone droning on and on about a topic or telling them what they should think or do. Questions are integral to their success. Ask them.
- 2) Secondly, they need to know you care – about the chapter, about the sisterhood or brotherhood, about them as individuals. Sometimes that means, as the time-honored phrase goes, “Being mature enough for everyone in the room.” Facilitation is a calculated gamble and you may lose a point because of emotion or popularity or counter-intuitive responses. Drive on.

There aren’t many “magic” questions out there that can immediately prompt candid discussion. The magic occurs when you craft your questions around issues, challenges, and topics members may be reluctant or unwilling to discuss...which is exactly why you are there. Listen carefully for guarded responses, code words and terms, or attempts to sidetrack the discussion.

I often begin with individual questions, and then I work toward the chapter. I do so in part to measure the comfort level of those at the meeting. Are they ready to get serious or do we need a little more time? Questions like “*How did I feel when...,*” “*What hasn’t been said about __,*” “*Why do we believe __,*” “*My biggest challenge as a member/senior/officer is __,*” will get them started. Then, “*We haven’t talked about this topic because...*” or “*Our chapter will be better if...*” can keep them moving.

Let’s take a struggling chapter as an example. Officers are discouraged. The energy level is mediocre at best. Organizational self-esteem was last seen leaving town hand-in-hand with chapter confidence. Now, put your ego away. What’s important here is not what you or I think. Let’s find out what the members think.

“*Why am I here?*” I sometimes ask members. “*What’s my purpose at this meeting?*” These are simple questions, but they transfer the responsibility for leading the meeting to the members. And, the responses may surprise you, but will always inform you: “*To tell us we suck...To tell us we have to improve...To tell us we have to double down in size.*” If there is no response, start calling on people; many of these members may have not have spoken at a meeting since 2015.

Questions for the members:

- “*What do you want to gain from this meeting?*”
- Better yet, “*What do you want your chapter to become as a result of this meeting and things to follow?*”

Keep in mind, some of these questions have already been asked, but at 2:32 a.m., in a mini-meeting, because no one had the courage to discuss these topics in a formal setting, which is why the chapter continues to flounder and why you are there to facilitate.

Some other prompts to initiate candid discussion – and also to give the members an opportunity to encourage each other and reinforce the fact that there are some positive dynamics in the group – include:

- *“I joined this chapter because:”*
- *“I remain a member of this chapter because:”*
- *“My greatest fear for my chapter is:”*
- *“One thing my sisters/brothers need to know about me regarding our chapter is:”*

Let’s assume your meeting is with an organization that is “troubled” – my all-inclusive term for issues with hazing, risk management and/or arrogance. Further, let’s assume the chapter has been found responsible for a violation or practice. First, let’s see how much the members know about the circumstances. Never assume all members understand what has happened.

I often encounter the *“We’re doing great!”* response to initial questions about a troubled chapter status. This allows me to ask, usually through more knowledgeable members, how “great” includes suspension of all activities or a lengthy probation following accountability from the institution and/or the inter/national organization for violations.

Membership size (large membership size) often breeds arrogance – the sense the chapter is doing just fine and success is inevitable. And members, especially younger members, may be less inclined to speak in a large chapter in which the culture involves a group of older members who push the buttons and toggle the switches from the back of the room.

To encourage candor, I’ll use a written anonymous response form – no name – to be collected and then redistributed among the members so no one reads her or his response. The prompts include:

- *“One thing our chapter should stop doing:”*
- *“One thing our chapter should start doing:”*
- *“One thing our chapter should continue to do:”*

Facilitator hack: The first two usually yield the best responses.

“Who’s going to be leading your chapter in 2019?” You can enhance the response by asking all seniors and then all juniors (‘18s and ‘19s in campus parlance) to stand at the back of the room. For those remaining seated, ask: *“Who wants to be President? Treasurer? New Member Educator? Please stand.”*

As younger members look at each other and then rise, the reaction from older members is always interesting. Ask the older members why they are surprised. And why younger members want to be officers.

How about hazing? Set aside the legal/disciplinary/policy reactions. Let's ask:

- *"Why do you think certain members haze?"*
- *"Why doesn't everyone haze?"*
- *"What is accomplished?"*

Facilitator hint: You'll have to be strong here. The hazers, sensing a disturbance in The Force, will begin citing the positive aspects of hazing but almost always beginning with the vertical pronoun, "I" as in, *"When I went through I learned ____"* Get in front of that by asking, *"I'd like these answers in chapter terms, please – what do we accomplish for our chapter?"*

- *"What is the upside of hazing? What is the downside?"*
- *"What is the ROI (return on investment)?"*
- *"If hazing is important and helps the chapter, why isn't everyone involved?"*
- *"Why don't you describe it in detail on the website or in the publicity offered by your councils or 'the University'?"*
- *"If hazing is important, why don't you fine or hold members accountable for not participating in the hazing?"*

Be comfortable with silence. Silence can mean a number of things, but usually good things. Processing. Considering. Weighing.

Responses to questions don't have to be verbal. Post-it notes under key terms on a wall or dry erase board will work and reflect a good visual. Standing in one part of the room is another. Anonymous answer sheets work as well. The important thing is to get candid answers into the mix.

Finally, bring it together. I often ask members, *"What's been the best part of the meeting?"* or *"What will we need in order to move forward?"* And, I like to sum up by asking the members for one or two words that reflect their feelings at that moment. Allow the leaders to speak last.

Your questions may vary greatly depending upon the circumstances. The consistent factors for questions include simplicity, respect for the members, even if that is not returned in kind, and encouraging change, whether directly or indirectly. Questions, not a lecture, bring out the opportunities in our chapters.

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fraternity. He now owns and operates Limberlost Consulting, Inc. in Carmel, Indiana. He begins his 32nd season as a high school football official this fall.