** ELI Online Focus Session**

**Discussion Facilitator Tips**

Facilitating discussion has two sides. First, it’s the art or skill of encouraging and promoting full participation by all members of the discussion group. Second, it entails summarizing the group’s thinking at key points to enable overall progress on the collective deliberation. The following ideas are suggestions for ways that you, as a discussion facilitator, can promote active participation and engagement.

*Set the Stage*

Make sure the group has a clear understanding of the topic, discussion goals, and how the discussion is to proceed.

#### Make sure everyone is introduced.

#### Make sure that everyone understands that the discussion about to happen is exploratory.

*Consider the Space*

Research tells us that flexible furniture and round tables can encourage greater interaction between participants. Consider arranging the room in a way that promotes, rather than hinders, group discussion.

#### Once the presentation has ended, ask everyone to arrange chairs in a circle.

#### Encourage participants to move around the room, meeting new colleagues.

#### If the group becomes too large, consider breaking the larger group into smaller teams for discussion. With a few minutes remaining in each discussion session, bring the group back together to share their observations.

*Work the Group*

Don’t discourage your active participants, but look for ways to engage those who are more reluctant to share their ideas.

#### Call on or encourage those who haven’t already spoken.

#### Ask questions that involve a person’s area of expertise.

#### Encourage participants to take notes, capturing their insights and ideas to eventually share with the group.

#### Assign roles to individuals in the group: notetaker, summarizer, and reporter.

*Capture the Stream of Ideas*

If you can capture the group’s ideas and insights, it may help the group to orient itself and know where to go next. It also helps promote a sense of progress or forward movement for the discussion, as well as preserving the group’s ideas.

#### If there’s nothing else at hand, use flip charts or whiteboards.

#### Use a laptop, projector, and a wiki or word-processing document.

#### Do as little editing of comments as possible; if in doubt, simply capture the idea—evaluation can happen later.

#### Whatever medium you use to record the group’s ideas, make sure that at the beginning it’s blank. This sends a clear message that it is the group that will generate the content.

*Don’t Present*

Facilitators can be tempted to become presenters, rather than facilitators.

#### Try to understand where the discussion is headed and direct as necessary.

#### While someone is talking, think about questions you can ask to stimulate further discussion.

#### Watch out for these discussion “killers”: getting bogged down in unnecessary detail; stalling as two participants get stuck in a debate; and falling into silence. Be proactive in helping the group get past these points if they occur.

*Synthesize, Don’t Debate*

Participants may say things with which you disagree or that fall under your area of expertise. Resist the temptation to debate or comment extensively.

#### Make connections between the current point and points made by others.

#### Weave individual points and insights into a larger conceptual framework so they integrate in a clear and obvious way.

#### Debate a point indirectly, by asking a question about the assumptions that underlie the point.

*Add Your Own Facilitation Ideas Below:*

