Guidelines for Facilitating Breakout Groups
(This overview is adapted from a guide for facilitating breakout groups in regional networking sessions.)

I. GROUP START-UP

A facilitator’s first task is to (re)state the topic of the breakout group, to say how much time is available for the group, to ask for assistance re timekeeping, and to ask for a volunteer to take notes. (As you initially facilitate groups, be caustious about assuming timekeeper or recorder responsibilities)

The facilitator’s main roles before the group really even starts are to:

A. make everyone feel welcome; invite, don’t force, everyone to participate; do not talk or dominate the group – nor let anyone else dominate. Stress that this is about listening to and learning from your colleagues;

B. use humor – it’s always a good thing. Flexibility is often necessary – so if most everyone wants to do something different – and it will contribute to the purpose of the overall meeting, don’t oppose the will of the group, even if you have to scrap your own plans – make the change, go with the flow;

C. identify the priorities of group members for discussion topics. It is very helpful when the facilitator listens to everyone and also makes sure this initial process does not take a lot of time!
   • one method is to review what occurred in the group during the last meeting and ask what group members want to talk about and get accomplished today. Ask for a show of hands on the sub-topic each most wants to discuss. Then note the resulting consensus and allocate time for the topic(s);
   • another easy way to identify priorities – particularly when most people are there for the first time – is to invite people to propose what they want to talk about, list these on a big sheet, ask them to vote for their priorities, and then agree on the time available for each.

D. it can help the recorder and the group to state the purpose of breakout group notes:
• capture consensus of the group and themes that continue through the group discussion;
• record breakthrough ideas;
• record specific tools and information needs/resources which are named;
• keep notes brief (limit to 1 big sheet?), but enough so someone not present will understand the essence of what went on in the group.

II. DISCUSSION

Having welcomed all, agreed on a volunteer timekeeper and recorder, and identified what to talk about, the main job of the facilitator is to:

A. start discussions;

B. stay out of the way (don’t talk too much) – and make sure no-one else dominates, or denies others the chance to speak. As facilitator, you don’t need to make content contributions, you set the scene and process so others can contribute!;

C. welcome all points of view. Ensure there is respect from/towards all (refer to Working Guidelines for Effective Groups as necessary – this document is available at geoffbeane.com);

D. keep an eye on the time and don’t let discussion drift or get stuck;

E. if time’s running short and all topics won’t get covered – stop and ask the group what to do (but don’t let this take a lot of time).

III. CLOSE

It’s often helpful if a breakout group ends with the facilitator asking the group (at least five minutes before time runs out!) to:

  o state what the group decided and agreed on;
  o the one, two, or three things to do in the next meeting;
  o what needs to happen before next meeting.

The facilitator or a volunteer can report back on these three points to the whole group.