



**Center for  
Alternative  
Dispute  
Resolution**

*Mediation. It Works!*

# Selecting a Facilitator for Your Meeting

Prepared by the  
Center for Alternative Dispute Resolution  
Hawaii State Judiciary





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## **Note to the Reader**

To make an informed choice of a facilitator for your meeting, you must have information and the ability to evaluate that information. This guide begins the educational process by presenting a framework for understanding facilitator competence. The information is based on research presented at the 1993 National Symposium on Court-Connected Dispute Resolution Research sponsored by the State Justice Institute and the National Center for State Courts, the ongoing work of the Test Design Project, the work of alternate dispute resolution policy makers, and the experience of dispute resolvers and program directors nationwide.

## **How to Use This Guide**

Mark the guide up. Use the checklists as you go. Don't feel that you must use all the information or go through all the suggested steps; use only what seems most helpful.

Center for Alternative Dispute Resolution  
The Judiciary, State of Hawaii  
Aliiolani Hale  
417 South King Street, Room 207  
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813  
Phone: (808) 539-4237  
Fax: (808) 539-4416  
[www.courts.state.hi.us/cadr](http://www.courts.state.hi.us/cadr)



## **1. Purpose of This Brochure**

This guide is for anyone looking for a meeting facilitator. It will be especially useful to government agencies, public and private organizations, and others who are looking for assistance in choosing a facilitator. Choosing an effective facilitator is an important step in determining the likelihood of a successful meeting.

What is facilitation? Facilitation is a collaborative way to manage a group discussion to help the group identify and solve problems, make decisions, and complete tasks. Facilitation encourages a cooperative environment so that the group can fulfill its purpose as easily as possible. Facilitation creates a climate that invites creative thinking, protects individuals from criticism, and generates ideas so the group can reach its goals.

## **2. What Qualifications Does a Facilitator Need?**

Qualifications refer to the amount and type of training, education and experience possessed by a facilitator. In Hawaii, a person can offer facilitation services without taking a class, passing a test or having a special license or certification. However, many facilitators have some training or experience. No one set of qualifications is right for every facilitation. It is important to evaluate your situation, and determine what type of person you think could help most effectively.

## **3. What Makes a Competent Facilitator?**

There is no universal answer to this question. No particular type or amount of education or job experience predicts success as a facilitator. Successful facilitators come from many different backgrounds.

Competence depends partly on the context of the dispute and the parties' expectations. It also depends on whether the facilitator has the right mix of acquired skills, training, education, experience and natural abilities to help resolve the specific dispute. Important skills and abilities include neutrality, ability to communicate, ability to listen and understand, and ability to define and clarify issues.

#### 4. Five Steps to Choosing a Qualified Facilitator

Because no easy formula can predict facilitator competence, the consumer must do some groundwork before selecting a facilitator. These steps are described on the next pages. Remember during your search that a facilitator should remain neutral and treat all participants with equal fairness and respect.

##### ✓ Checklist: Five Steps to Choosing a Facilitator

- Decide what you want from facilitation
- Get a list of facilitators
- Look over facilitators' written qualifications
- Interview facilitators
- Evaluate information and make decision

##### 4.1. Decide What You Want from Facilitation

Think about your goals for the session. Facilitators may fill many roles. They may be useful in gathering and analyzing information about the situation to help sort out the issues, evaluate the effectiveness of current procedures where needed, and identify possible alternatives for action. Facilitators may be helpful at the design stage, when parties need a process for working together. Facilitators may also play important parts as coaches, trainers, and team builders. You must assess which one or all of these roles a facilitator will play in your situation.

Think about your situation and the context in which you must resolve it. What is the time frame? Who are the participants and what sort of individual are they likely to trust and work with? Will you be working with community members, public interest groups, private organizations, or government agencies? You must identify your needs before beginning the search for a facilitator. Additionally, different facilitators have different styles.

##### 4.2. Compile a List of Names

You can get a list of facilitators from several sources.

**Word of mouth.** Ask a friend, co-worker, neighbor, or someone you trust. Describe your case to a facilitator and ask, "Other than yourself, who are the most skilled facilitators in town in this kind of case?" Talk to people who have worked with the facilitator (you can ask the facilitator for names of clients). What were their cases about and what were their impressions of the facilitator?



**Written list.** Check local listings in the Yellow Pages under “Mediation Services.” Martindale-Hubbell, available in the Hawaii State Supreme Court law library, publishes a national Dispute Resolution Dictionary containing the names of service providers. Many national dispute resolution membership organizations keep lists of practitioner members and offer referral services. Some may charge for their referral services.

**✓ Checklist: Get Names**

- Ask people you trust
- Look at directories

**4.3. Evaluate Written Materials**

Call or write several facilitators or community mediation centers on your list and ask them to send you their promotional materials, resumes, references and a sample of their written work. These materials should cover most of the following topics:

**Facilitation Training.** How was the facilitator trained? Some facilitators receive formal classroom-style training. Some participate in apprenticeships or in mentoring programs. While training alone does not guarantee a competent facilitator, most professional facilitators have had some type of formal training. How many hours of training has this facilitator had? How recent was the training?

**Experience.** Evaluate the facilitator’s type and amount of experience (number of years of facilitation, number of facilitations conducted, types of facilitations conducted). How many cases similar to yours has the facilitator handled? A facilitator’s experience is particularly important if he or she has had limited formal training.

**Written work.** Some facilitators will write meeting summaries. Some work as a team with recorders who write the meeting summary. Others may not provide a summary. If your facilitator will prepare written work for your case, you may want to review a sample. Samples could include meeting summaries or reports. Any sample should be clear, well organized, and use neutral language.

**Orientation Sessions.** Some facilitators will meet with the participants to explain the facilitation process and to discuss whether they want to facilitate their case.

**Cost.** Understand the provider’s fee structure. Does the facilitator charge by the hour, session or the day? How much per hour, session or day? Or, will the facilitator accept a flat fee for the entire process?

✓ **Checklist: Evaluate Written Materials**

- Training: How much? What? How recent?
- Experience: What kinds of meetings? How many? Specialties?
- Writing (if necessary): Understandable? Complete? Concise?
- Fees: Hourly? Sessions? Daily? Flat fee? How much?


**4.4. Interview the Facilitator**

Talk to the facilitators in person or by phone. Or, if you choose a community mediation center, speak with the person in charge. Explain your situation briefly. During the interview, observe the facilitator’s interpersonal and professional skills. Qualities often found in effective facilitators include neutrality, emotional stability and maturity, integrity, and sensitivity. Look also for good interviewing skills, verbal and nonverbal communication skills, ability to listen, ability to define and clarify issues, problem-solving ability and organization.

During the conversation, you also may want to ask questions about matters covered in the written materials and other topics. Some topics to discuss in the interview include:

**Training, Knowledge and Experience.** Ask the facilitator, “How have your education and experience prepared you to help us facilitate this specific case?” Ask, “Do you participate in continuing education, ongoing supervision, or consultation?”

People often ask whether a facilitator should be an expert in the subject matter of the case. The answer depends on the type of case and the parties’ expectations and needs. When the subject of the case is highly technical or complex, a facilitator who comes to the table with some substantive knowledge could help the parties focus on key issues. Ask the facilitator if he or she thinks subject-matter expertise is necessary for this case, and why or why not. If the facilitator believes such knowledge is important, how will the facilitator obtain that knowledge?



In some cases, the parties may prefer a facilitator with no special knowledge of the subject. The benefit of this approach comes from avoiding a facilitator's preconceived notions of the desired outcomes and letting the participants come up with their own solutions.

**Style.** Ask, “What values and goals do you emphasize in your practice?” For example, does the facilitator encourage the participants to communicate directly with each other, or does he or she control the interchanges? The facilitator should be able to describe his or her style of facilitation. Different facilitators practice their craft in different ways, although some facilitators can change their style to suit the parties' specific needs.

Keeping track of what has been said during facilitation may be important. Ask if the facilitator keeps a visible written record of agreements, points of interest, and information needs during the facilitation. Usually this is done on chart paper with a marker, and is called a “meeting summary” or “group memory.”

**Conflict of Interest.** Ask, “Do you have a prior relationship with any of the participants?” The facilitator should reveal any prior relationship or personal bias that would affect his or her performance, and any financial interest that may affect the result.

**Logistics.** Who will arrange meeting times and locations and prepare agendas? Who will set up, clean up, and provide audio-visual equipment? Who will prepare the written meeting summary? Does the facilitator work as a team with a recorder or alone?

**Cost.** Ask, “How would you estimate costs for this case? How can we keep costs down?” Are there any other charges associated with the facilitation? Does the facilitator perform any pro bono (free) services or work on a sliding-fee scale? If a facilitator and recorder attend the session, must the parties pay for both? Does the facilitator charge separately for preparation time and the actual facilitation?

**✓ Checklist: Talk to the Facilitator**

- More about training and experience?
- What approach to facilitation style?
- Conflict of interest?
- Logistics: Meetings? Meeting summaries?
- How much will this cost?



#### 4.5. Evaluate Information and Make a Decision

During the interviews, you probably observed the facilitators' skills and abilities at several important tasks. These tasks, which facilitators perform in almost all facilitations, include:

- gathering background information
- listening and understanding
- communicating with the participants and helping the participants communicate
- earning trust and maintaining a sense of humor
- analyzing complex information
- helping the parties reach agreement
- documenting information

Ask yourself which of the facilitators best demonstrated these skills. Consider the evaluations of others who have used this facilitator. Review the other questions on this checklist. Make sure that the facilitator's cost and availability coincide with your resources and time frame. Then ask yourself the following questions:

- Did the facilitator understand your problem? Answer your questions clearly?
- Did the facilitator constructively manage any expressions of anger or tension?
- Is the facilitator likely to work well with the various participants involved in your case?
- Did the facilitator convey respect and neutrality?
- Did the facilitator understand what was important to you?
- Did the facilitator understand the scope and intensity of the case?
- Did the facilitator appear comfortable with the subject matter of the meeting?
- Did you trust the facilitator?

#### Checklist: Evaluate

- Check the facilitator's experience and skills against the tasks listed above.
- Does the facilitator have the qualifications you want?
- Can you afford the services?
- Can the facilitator work within your time frame?
- Will the other participants feel comfortable with this facilitator?





## **5. Conclusion**

Choosing the right facilitator can help determine the likelihood of successful meetings. The increasing use of meeting facilitation has outpaced knowledge about how to measure facilitator competence. You can choose a qualified facilitator by thinking about what you expect, gathering information about facilitators, and evaluating and using the information in this guide.