

The Process of a Good Discussion

When a group of individuals is engaged in discussion on some topic, there are several elements in the process of discussion which serve to distinguish a good discussion from a poor one. They represent the dimensions that a discussion leader needs to attend during the course of a discussion. A number of these are listed below with sample questions or comments that a discussion leader might use in each case.

Focus: A discussion needs to stay on track rather than go wandering off on various tangents incidental to the main issues at hand. Discussion should also be pitched at a level appropriate to the knowledge and background of the participants.

*How does that relate to the question we are addressing?
Where did you find the author saying that?
Can you tie that to the question of...?
Let's see if we can get back to the main issue.*

Clarity: Statements made during the course of a discussion should be readily understood by all participants. Examples should be provided when necessary to clarify concepts and ideas.

*Can you say a bit more about that?
Could you be more specific?
Can you give us an example of that?
How does that differ from what Susan just said?*

Validity: Statements should be well-supported and explained so that the basis of the statement becomes clear. Simply declaring something to be so does not help the course of discussion.

*What leads you to say that?
Could you explain that a bit more?
How would you back that statement up?
Why do you say this is necessary?*

Scope: Good discussions bring forth a diversity of ideas and opinions and stimulate new ways of looking at issues among the participants. Discussions should be comprehensive rather than narrowly focused.

*Who sees things differently?
What might be a different approach to that?
Can we hear some pros as well as the cons?
What additional considerations might be examined?
How would you respond to someone who said...?*

Interest: Discussions need to be stimulating enough to maintain the interest of all members of the group. It helps if the issues being addressed are seen as relevant to the interests of those in the discussion.

What does this mean to you?
How is this relevant to our present situation?
What would you personally look for in evaluating...?

Progression: A discussion should provide a sense of movement, if not toward some specific conclusion or consensus, at least toward a deeper understanding of the issues and their complexity.

Now that we have settled that, what about this...?
Where are we now regarding the issue at this point?
Can anyone summarize the points covered this far?
What conclusions can we draw from this?

Participation: A goal of a discussion is to have everyone involved and participating in the discussion. Discussions should not be dominated by just a few participants. Side conversations tend to be distracting and should be avoided.

Let's hear from some others.
What is your view on this?
Mark, is there a point that you want to make?
Who have we not heard from as yet?

Pattern: The pattern of interaction within the group should be group-centered rather than leader-centered. Members of the group need to learn to discuss the issues among themselves, not with the group leader. The judge of the appropriateness and correctness of the answers is not the leader but the participants themselves.

How would you respond to John's position?
Do you agree with what Jane just said?
What do you think about his assertion that...?
Is everyone in agreement on this point?