

Introduction to facilitating a Building Bridges Programme

Facilitating BB, general principles

You need a lot of stones to build a good working bridge. This is also the case with facilitating Building Bridges. To have a good overview of it all, we have divided several necessities into five categories. We will look at the following categories:

- Personal
- Relational
- Professional
- Programme
- Environment

Personal

Personality

Reliable, welcoming and unifying

Qualities

In the BB Guidebook the required skills and qualities of the BB facilitator are mentioned. I will talk later on the professional side of the (mostly volunteer) facilitator. Qualities: communication, listening, offering support, organizational skills, mature and flexible.

Facing the stories

As a BB facilitator you will hear the most personal, sometimes horrendous, stories. Sometimes emotional but always very private. You have to be able to cope with this. You can hear the most difficult moments of one's life.

Attitude

Your attitude is very important before, during and after Building Bridges. You have to be *welcoming* towards all participants. This will help to remove some barriers participants may feel. (ex-)Prisoners are not always welcome in society and a prison environment does not feel welcoming towards victims. So your attitude can make a difference here.

Even more essential is the fact that you have to be *non-judgemental*. Judgement comes easy and is something the prisoners are used to. For them to become more open and to share their story, it is crucial for the facilitators to be non-judgemental towards all participants and their story.

To do so, you have to be *open minded*. The participants have their own story, but also their culture, beliefs and opinions. They may differ tremendously from your own. Being open minded gives them space.

Relational

Facilitators as a team

Building Bridges is a team effort. Therefore it is important to have a team with good mutual relationships. Invest in your team, in the team members. This will reflect on the participants as well.

To avoid ambiguity, role should be clearly divided. What role will the facilitator have? And what comes with the role of co-facilitator? Speak about this while preparing for Building Bridges. Make appointments about the tasks everyone has, so everyone will feel responsible for their own tasks.

Be sure to cooperate. Each person has its own strengths and weaknesses. You can support and strengthen one another. This is also the case during the discussions. You bring your own experience, examples and views along. This way you can complement each other. But be sure not to hinder one another.

Facilitator and participants

Just as important is the relationship between the facilitators and the participants. The participants really appreciate a good relationship with the facilitators. Especially in the first few sessions. Because during those sessions, you are the bridge between the offenders and the victims. It is important for them to feel they are all important and to notice that you don't focus more on the victims or the offenders. They all appreciate the fact that you have a real interest in them, that you care for their well being. In The Netherlands we worked with trained volunteers who had only experiences in giving courses to offenders. It took a while for them to find a way to communicate equally to the offenders and victims about all the subjects.

Before, during, in between and after

The importance of a good relationship stretches beyond the Building Bridges sessions. It starts with the promotion of BB. It is crucial during the first time you meet potential participants. Just like your attitude, the relational quality will make a difference in the chance a victim or offender will participate.

It's a key element during the sessions. But also in-between the sessions. A session can be very confrontational for a participant. So you have to be available in between sessions if they really need to talk, as well as after finishing the programme. Being available for aftercare is important for the healing process of victims and offenders. Sometimes all they need is just the knowledge that you are available. Phone them, offer them any support they need (or even plan a reunion 😊).

Facilitating life stories

One of the key elements of the sessions is the sharing of the life stories. Each participant can tell his or her story. Some have done this before. Some are natural born story tellers. But often, the stories the participants are going to tell are emotional for themselves and for their audience. These life stories have a large scope in years, details and events. So some participants need more than just guidelines. They need help with arranging their life story. You can help with this. Help them in the preparation. It is also possible to help them by interviewing them during the session.

Dialogue and confrontations

As (co) facilitator you lead the groupw discussions plenary or in the small group. In the way you do this, the group sees an example of how to communicate respectful, listen, show interest, mirror, and show empathy.

Professional

Professional vs volunteer / community

BB is different in nature from professional support. We use 'resources' that exist in communities to provide support for victims and offenders in the process of seeking restoration of crime. BB also builds bridges between community and prison (or other settings for offenders). So the role of facilitator (as a volunteer) is open to anyone, regardless of their professional status. Key factors for suitability: motivation, commitment, possession of skills and attributes and willingness to be trained.

Training

You can't run a Building Bridges without training. Your team needs to know about the in's and out's that comes with Building Bridges. The need to learn about restorative justice, about the themes, the risks and chances. They need to know about the rules that come with interacting with prisoners. They need to be equipped about interacting with victims. And there needs to be space to ask their questions. So training is essential.

Responsibility

Running a Building Bridges course comes with a great responsibility! You are asking offenders and victims to look each other in the eye. To open up. To face their demons. Don't take this light.

Be also sure that every team member takes his/her responsibility towards the team, the group and the programme leader of the organization.

Programme

Preparing the (5-8) sessions

Benjamin Franklin once said "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail." So we need to prepare the sessions. Each sessions has its own theme. We advice you to really go through the subject with the team, and decide on what content you want to teach and which questions you want to have discussed by the participants. Prepare your presentation and prepare yourself mentally on the next session. There is a chance that the session will not go as planned, but structured plans will help coping with that.

Preparing the materials

Building Bridges comes with several materials. Have these prepared in time. Have your promotion materials ready in time. But also make sure you have the other materials in order. These may differ per country, but think of workbooks, powerpoints, guidebooks, questionnaires, pens, activity supplies, certificates, invitation forms for guests. Have them ready for each session, so you can present yourself composed.

Time management

Time management during the sessions is one of the hardest things in Building Bridges, especially when you have less time for a session than you would ideally

want to. But in prison, you can not run late. So you need to have a clear time schedule and stick to it. When you run out of time, decide on forehand what you can possibly skip or delay.

Appointments with facilities

For a BB to run successfully in a facility like a prison or a half way home, there need to be appointments.

- When can the course start?
- How long can a session be?
- Where will the session be held?
- Who exactly are allowed to participate and how are the participants recruited?
- What stuff can you bring along? (multimedia, food, pens)
- What are conditions for BB to run?
- What help do you need from the facility?
- How many guests can be invited to the last session?

It often takes a lot of time to make these appointments. So be sure to start in time. And keep communicating with your contact person from the facility. Because often, some things will change during a BB or new questions will arise.

Environment

Create healing atmosphere

The aim of Building Bridges is restoration between victims and offenders, but also in their personal lives. A condition for this is a healing atmosphere. You have to create this atmosphere proactive. Be clear about the social rules you want to be upheld during the course such as:

- Respect
- Listening to each other
- Stop is stop
- Keeping everything confidentially

Encourage participants to communicate respectfully and try to really listen to each other. Speak words of encouragement, hope and understanding.

Prison culture

Most of the time, the prison culture does not come with a healing atmosphere. It often brings the opposite. You have to realize that the prison culture does not promote being vulnerable. As facilitator in this context, try to stay out of juridical discussions and choosing sides. The legal matters or understanding the prison culture is complicated, so keep the focus on the personal stories and the good choices that can be made.

Prison workers

Prison workers in general have not been trained in Restorative Justice and might not understand the principles of Building Bridges. Keep explaining what you want to do and why, and look for opportunities to share in the prison teams about BB. Ask their cooperation and maybe even invite them for the last celebratory session. Per country and facility it may differ whether there should be prison personnel in the room during the sessions, but we tend to ask to be with the group without personnel (confidentiality).