

Guidance for Facilitators

# Beyond Facilitation

## The Cultivation of an Overdose Fatality Review Team

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The success of an overdose fatality review (OFR) is directly related to its leadership. While champions of the process are needed, it is the role of facilitator that will make or break the team.

### Facilitators Are Key to OFR Success

All OFR members come with their own skills and expertise, but it takes the facilitator to make sure things run smoothly: the cheerleader to encourage them to share, the confidant when they need emotional support, and the leader to nudge boundaries to create systems change. This is the person who is willing to meet teams where they are at. The person who does not just go through the motions or check boxes but who brings passion and urgency so that the rest of the team finds the work relevant and valuable. It is the person who continues to learn and encourages everyone else to be curious about the next question. It is the person who creates a safe and inclusive environment not only to share sensitive information, but to allow members to be vulnerable. This may sound overly dramatic, but there is a reason that not all committees and community projects work.

**It cannot be emphasized enough how important the role of an OFR facilitator is.**

An OFR team is much like any other team you might work with. There are different personalities and diverse perspectives, and everyone represents various sectors. As a facilitator, your role is to understand and work with members so you know how to motivate the team to move recommendations forward and address the overall purpose of OFRs: to prevent overdose deaths. OFR teams are unique in that you are asking members to open their minds, think differently, and brainstorm how they can work better together to serve those struggling with a substance use disorder and those in recovery. This means breaking down barriers and being open to the idea that maybe the way we have been doing things all along is more hurtful than helpful. It is not an easy task by any means.

### Members' Trust Is Essential

The success of OFR teams can be seen through the following: "agencies continuing to send staff members to the reviews, members contributing to the discussion,

**Tip:**

Ask members, “What do you need to be successful?” to help you know what it will take to have an engaged member involved in the process.

members are open to feedback and are not defensive, members come more prepared for each meeting, and members linger after the meeting has formally ended to network with other members.”<sup>1</sup> To get to that success, team members need to have trust in one another and in the process. They have to find it valuable and a good use of their time, while being committed to keeping the work going. One important role of the facilitator is to help cultivate that trust with members by creating an inclusive environment and building a process of engagement, which goes beyond the review.

OFRs allow community partners to look at a decedent’s life holistically. The team is able to review the person’s entire journey and assess how systems-level change could have prevented the person’s fatal overdose. As facilitators, we ask the hard questions and support our members in understanding their part or how the community could have done things differently to save someone’s life.

## Robust OFR Teams Make Meaningful Community Change

The change that needs to happen to prevent overdose deaths is up to the community partners, but it is up to the facilitator to help cultivate the team to get to that point. The two go hand in hand. The following are **real-life examples facilitators can use** to cultivate their teams to get to that point of community change. The list starts with those tasks that can happen as OFR teams first start and continues with ideas that might be useful the longer a team is around.

<sup>1</sup> Melissa Heinen and Mallory O’Brien, “Overdose Fatality Review: A Practitioner’s Guide to Implementation,” BJA’s Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Abuse Program, July 2020, p. 26, available at [https://www.cossapresources.org/Content/Documents/Articles/Overdose\\_Fatality\\_Review\\_Practitioners\\_Guide.pdf](https://www.cossapresources.org/Content/Documents/Articles/Overdose_Fatality_Review_Practitioners_Guide.pdf).

### 1. Tailor the process to your community.

The COSSAP resources will share best practices for any OFR team, yet you have to make the process work for your members and your community. Put your stamp on the process, and let members help create this so that they feel invested in the system from the beginning. Is there something that your community values or a slogan that you could include in your group reminders (e.g., “have a can-do attitude”)? Are announcements part of your process so that members can share what they are doing to help the mission or brag about good work they are doing? Is there a convenient location for members to meet or a local treat that members enjoy eating that you can provide at your meeting? Think about what is unique about your community and your members that you can include in the process.

### 2. Have a coffee date.

As the facilitator, take the time to have a one-on-one with members, and truly get to know them. You want to build a valuable and worthwhile process so that members participate and show up for every review, share data, and stay truly engaged. Meeting the team before you start your OFR process allows you to understand members’ strengths, skill sets, agendas, interests, and passions and also where you will have challenges. By taking the time to build those relationships, you will also know where you can push them in conversations. For example, some law enforcement members may say that if you want those from the sector to jump in line, use one of the members as an example. Sometimes this may be done with humor, or it may be done by asking, “What could we, collectively, have done differently to save that person’s life?” If you have taken the time to build rapport, you can stimulate the conversation with members considering their agencies and the systems involved. As new members come onto the team, get to know them as well so that you can continue to have a good pulse on who your members are, what they need to be engaged, and where the opportunities to change are.

### 3. Break the ice.

Using an engagement tool at the beginning of your review enables members to practice public speaking, which is important when not all have had the experience or feel comfortable speaking in front of others. It also gives people an opportunity to get to know each other. An icebreaker question is a quick tool that you can use to help engage members. For example, ask members to introduce themselves by stating their names and the agencies they represent and by answering a question such as, “What emoji do you most use?” or “What’s your favorite Thanksgiving side dish?” or “What’s your favorite winter activity?” Do not forget to use humor as well; and ask silly questions such as, “If you were singing karaoke, what song would you choose?” or “If you had one T-shirt on for the rest of your life and it could only display one word, what would that word be?” There are a lot of great lists of icebreaker questions online, and here is your opportunity to have some fun. It brings a bit of comic relief to balance the seriousness and heartbreaking stories that are part of our work.

### 4. Drop the jargon.

In the *OFR Practitioner’s Guide to Implementation*, the author notes that facilitators encourage not using official titles such as “chief” or “commissioner.” While education and experience are appreciated, it is important that all members feel comfortable being part of the conversation. Not using titles takes away some of the power dynamics that exist. In addition, jargon can be very divisive in a room. Think about using an “acroknock,” in which members can knock on the table, or raise their hands in a virtual meeting, and then the person who has used the acronym has to explain it to the team. Trying to make our conversations jargon free, at least until members all know the terminology, creates less confusion and better communication between members. It can also add some fun to your discussion when you call people out with a knock for using acronyms.

### 5. Get on the same page.

For them to make the work a priority, the process has to be relevant to OFR team members. Facilitators can make sure they are on the same page as the team by regularly checking in with members and asking for feedback. This may be done by having conversations before and/or after reviews, making check-in phone calls, or finding time to build relationships with members outside of the review process. These conversations may be to address misunderstandings that happen at an OFR about which you want to clear the air. They also may be used to prepare a member ahead of a meeting on questions you have or asking the member to evaluate how things are going and how to strengthen the process. Take the time to ask members for feedback, listen to their input, and, if possible, implement changes based on those ideas.

### 6. Find your champions.

As a facilitator, you cannot take all the recommendations on by yourself. When you engage members outside of the review, they can help champion recommendations, offer their subject-matter expertise, and begin implementing change in their own work. You can also involve members in the process by having them present during an OFR to address a recommendation or a topic about which the group needs more information. Members can conduct research within their agencies to better understand client needs and then share their perspectives with the OFR team. The work of OFRs is much bigger than reviewing deaths. It is connecting recommendations with what members do in their daily work and finding opportunities for them to champion community and systems change.

#### Tip:

Successful facilitators should be able to discern when humor can be used to lift up the team, be sensitive and empathetic when the time calls for it, and be energetic when recommendations need to move forward.

## 7. Work behind the scenes.

Some cultivation techniques are simply behind-the-scenes work in building a successful review process. This may include showing up to the review an hour ahead of time to make sure the environment is set up to make the team feel comfortable; being prepared for the review, which includes knowing the data in case some members do not show up; prepping members ahead of time to make sure that data is available and that they feel comfortable presenting it to the group; creating a comfortable and inclusive environment so that everyone feels comfortable talking and has the ability to share his or her perspectives; having consistent communication with members so they understand what is expected of them and the process; and finally, bringing energy and enthusiasm! Reviews can be draining with all the data and the sad stories that are shared.

## 8. Get personal.

As you check in and engage members with the process, take the time to get to know them, if they are willing. Find out a member's favorite candy and send some with a personal note. Send a member a birthday card

or email when it is his or her special day, a sympathy card when a member has lost someone important in the family, or even flowers when a member has had surgery. Ask members questions and take the time to listen. Remember that many members around the table may have been "voluntold" to be there, while others may be coming to the reviews on their time off. Everyone likes to feel appreciated, and it is the facilitator's role to know members well enough to decide what kind of appreciation will make them feel best.

Helping cultivate the OFR team will lead to the team's success, and, in turn, help the team reach its goal of preventing overdose deaths. While facilitators can engage members in many ways, one of the best ways is to simply be yourself. Be genuine. Be human. Make mistakes. Listen. Your members will respect you more. It will lead to a process that members make a priority and look forward to being involved with. They may come for the silly icebreaker question, or because they want to see members and network, or because they want to make an impact and save lives. No matter the reason, if members are engaged, you will have done your job as an OFR facilitator and cultivated a successful OFR team.

Visit the COSSAP Resource Center at [www.cossapresources.org](http://www.cossapresources.org).

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