

Facilitation

Facilitation at a Glance!
by Ingrid Bens

Chapter 1

What Is Facilitation?

Facilitation is a way of providing leadership without taking the reins. A facilitator's job is to get others to assume responsibility and to take the lead.

What Does a Facilitator Do?

Facilitators make their contribution by:

- . helping the group define its overall goal, as well as its specific objectives
- . helping members assess their needs and create plans to meet them
- . providing processes that help members use their time efficiently to make high-quality decisions
- . guiding group discussion to keep it on track
- . making accurate notes that reflect the ideas of members
- . helping the group understand its own processes in order to work more effectively
- . making sure that assumptions are surfaced and tested
- . supporting members in assessing their current skills, as well as building new skills
- . using consensus to help a group make decisions that take all members' opinions into account
- . supporting members in managing their own interpersonal dynamics
- . providing feedback to the group members so that they can assess their progress and make adjustments
- . managing conflict using a collaborative approach
- . helping the group communicate effectively
- . helping the group access resources from inside and outside the group
- . creating an environment where members enjoy a positive, growing experience while they work to attain group goals
- . fostering leadership in others by sharing the responsibility for leading the group
- . teaching and empowering others to facilitate

Differentiating Between Process and Content

The content of any meeting is what is being discussed: the task at hand, the subjects being dealt with, and the problems being solved. The content is expressed in the agenda and in the words that are spoken. Because it is the verbal portion of the meeting, the content is obvious and typically consumes the attention of the members.

Process deals with how things are being discussed: the methods, procedures, format and tools used. The process also includes the style of the interaction, the group dynamics and the climate that is established. Because the process is often silent, it is harder to pinpoint. It is largely unseen and often ignored in most meetings, as people are focused on the content.

Content

What

- The subjects for discussion
- The task
- The problems being solved
- The decisions made
- The agenda items
- The goals

Process

How

- The methods & procedures
- How relations are maintained
- The tools being used

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The rules or norms set
The group dynamics
The climate

Content vs. Process Leadership

A meeting leader offering an opinion with the intent of influencing the outcome of discussions is acting as the 'content leader'.

In contrast, a facilitator's job is to manage the process and leave content to the participants. When a meeting leader is neutral on the content and actively orchestrates the action, he or she is acting as the 'process leader' or facilitator.

Facilitation Behaviors & Tools

As a facilitator, you'll have an extensive set of behaviors and tools at your disposal. These fall into two categories: Core Practices and Process Tools.

The Core Practices define the manner, style and behaviors of the facilitator.

Experienced facilitators:

- . stay neutral
- . listen actively
- . ask questions
- . paraphrase
- . synthesize ideas
- . use appropriate language
- . manage digression
- . offer clear summaries
- . give and receive feedback

The effectiveness of any of these practices depends on how you handle yourself.

The Process Tools, which are structured activities that provide a clear sequence of steps, include the following:

- . Visioning
- . Brainstorming
- . Nominal Group Technique
- . Forcefield Analysis
- . Gap Analysis
- . Multi-voting
- . Priority Setting
- . Root-Cause Analysis
- . Decision Grids
- . Systematic Problem Solving

Core Practices Overview

When facilitating you need to be constantly using the following core practices:

Stay neutral on content - Your job is to focus on the process role and avoid the temptation of offering opinions about the topic under discussion. You should use questions and suggestions to offer ideas that spring to mind, but never impose opinions on the group.

Listen actively - Look people in the eye, use attentive body language and paraphrase what they are saying. Always make eye contact with people while they speak, when paraphrasing what they have just said and when summarizing their key ideas. Also use eye contact to let people know they can speak next and to prompt the quiet ones in the crowd to participate.

Paraphrase to clarify - This involves repeating what people say to make sure they know they are being heard, to let others hear their points a second time and to clarify key ideas (e.g., "Are you saying ...? Am I understanding you to mean ...?").

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Ask questions - This is the most important tool you possess. Questions test assumptions, invite participation, gather information and probe for hidden points. Effective questioning allows you to delve past the symptoms to get at root causes.

Use the flip chart - This is another tool you should use constantly. It helps keep track of emerging ideas as well as final decisions. Notes should be brief and concise. They must reflect what the participants have said, not your interpretation of what they said.

Keep time - Appoint a timekeeper to call out time markers, or use a timer to help keep the group on track. Time guidelines need to be established for each item on an agenda. At first it may be distracting but keeping track of time forces participants to stay focused.

Play Ping-Pong - Picture yourself standing at the flip chart with a Ping-Pong paddle in one hand. If someone asks a question or makes a comment, redirect it by sending it back to someone else to answer or build on. This is a great way to get participants to interact with one another (e.g., "Sally, how would you answer the question Bill has just posed to me?").

Test Assumptions - You need to bring the assumptions people are operating under out into the open and clarify them so that they are clearly understood by everyone. These assumptions may even need to be challenged before a group can explore new ground (e.g., "John, on what basis are you making the comment that Bob's idea is too narrow in focus?").

Synthesize - Don't just record individual ideas of participants. Instead, get people to comment and build on each other's thoughts to ensure that the ideas recorded on the flip chart represent collective thinking. This builds consensus and commitment (e.g., "Alice, what would you add to Jeff's comments?").

Hold up a mirror - Periodically tell the group how they look to you so that they can interpret their actions and make corrections (e.g., "Two people have not said anything for ten minutes and three other people are reading memos. What's this telling us we need to do?").

Summarize periodically - A great facilitator listens attentively to everything that is said, and then offers concise and timely summaries. Summarize when you want to revive a discussion that has ground to a halt or to end a discussion when things seem to be wrapping up.

Label sidetracks - It's your responsibility to let the group members know when they're off-track. They can then decide to pursue the sidetrack, or stop their current discussion and get back to the agenda (e.g., "We are now discussing something that isn't on our agenda. What does the group want to do?").

Park it - At every meeting, tape a flip-chart sheet to a wall to record all sidetrack items. Later, these items can be reviewed for inclusion in a future agenda. 'Parking lot' sheets let you capture ideas that may be important later, while staying on track.

Use the spell-check button - Most people are nervous enough about writing on flip charts without having to worry that they're spelling every word right. You will relax everyone by drawing a spell-check button at the top right corner of every flip sheet. Tell participants they "can spell creatively, since pressing the spell-check button automatically eliminates all errors."

Focus on Questioning

Effective questioning is the key facilitative technique. As a facilitator, you can never ask too many questions.

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IF YOU WANT TO ...

Stimulate everyone's thinking

Allow people to respond voluntarily or avoid putting an individual on the spot

Stimulate one person to think and respond

Tap the known resources of an "expert" in the group.

THEN...

Direct questions to the group

Ask a question such as "What experiences have any of you had with this problem?"

Direct the question to that individual. "How should we handle this, Bill?"

Direct the question to that person "Mary, you have a lot of experience... what would you do?"

Effective questioning means:

Asking the right questions at the right time

Select the right type of question and phrase it so that it solicits the best possible response. Then, direct it to the right person.

Sample Probing Questions

The following sample questions are designed to delve more deeply into a problem situation.

- . How would you describe the current situation in this department?
 - . How would your most important customer describe it?
 - . How would a senior manager describe it?
 - . How long has this situation been going on?
 - . How do you feel about the situation?
 - . Why hasn't the problem been solved?
 - . Who wants change to take place? Who does not?
 - . Who contributes to the problem?
 - . How do you contribute to the problem?
 - . If the problem were totally resolved, what would the situation look like?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, how serious would you say this problem is?
- | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| not serious at all -- somewhat serious -- very serious | | | | |
- . What are the most significant barriers to solving this problem?
 - . What are the parameters of this initiative? (time, money, materials)
 - . Are any solutions going to be taboo or unacceptable?
 - . How would you rate the overall level of commitment to making changes that have been agreed to?
- | | | | | |
|-----|---|--------|---|------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Low | | Medium | | High |

Questioning: Do's and Don'ts

Do ...

- Ask clear, concise questions covering a single issue
- Ask challenging questions that will stimulate thought
- Ask reasonable questions based on what people know
- Ask honest and relevant questions

Don't ...

- Ask rambling, ambiguous questions that cover multiple issues
- Ask questions that don't provide an opportunity for thought
- Ask questions that most people can't answer
- Ask "trick" questions designed to fool them

The Language of Facilitation

A particular style of language has evolved as a part of facilitation. These

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techniques are especially important when it comes to commenting on people's behavior without sounding critical or judgmental. The main language techniques are as follows:

- . paraphrasing
- . reporting behavior
- . describing feelings
- . perception checking

Paraphrasing involves describing, in your own words, what another person's remarks convey.

"If I understand you correctly, you are saying..."
"Is this an accurate understanding of your point...?"
"What you are saying is..."

You should be paraphrasing continuously, especially if the discussion starts to spin in circles or if people are getting heated. This repetition assures participants that their ideas are being heard. New facilitators often make the mistake of not paraphrasing enough.

Reporting behavior consists of stating the specific, observable actions of others without making accusations or generalizations about them as people or attributing motives to them.

"This is the third time you have rolled your eyes while I was presenting my ideas."
"Two of you are reading and the others have grown very quiet."

By describing specific behaviors you give participants information about how their actions are being perceived. Feeding this information back to participants in a non-threatening manner opens the door for individuals to suggest actions to improve the existing situation.

Descriptions of feelings consists of specifying or identifying feelings by naming the feeling, using a metaphor, figure of speech, or action urge.

"I feel exhausted." (naming)
"I feel like a kid on vacation." (metaphor)
"I feel like a fly on the wall." (figure of speech)
"I feel like jumping for joy!" (action urge)

As a facilitator, you need to be in touch with how you're feeling and not be afraid to share those feelings with the group. It is very helpful to be honest with a group by telling them "I feel exhausted right now," or "I feel frustrated." This lets other people know that it's okay for them to express feelings.

Perception checking is describing what you perceive to be another person's inner state in order to check if you understand what they are feeling.

"You appear upset by the last comment that was made. Are you?"
"You seem impatient. Are you anxious to move on to the next topic?"

Perception checking is a very important tool. It lets you take the pulse of participants who may be experiencing emotions that get in the way of their participation.

How Neutral Do Facilitators Really Need To Be?

One of the toughest challenges as a facilitator is staying neutral.

While your objective is to focus on process and stay out of content, there are three techniques that you can use to give direction without compromising your neutral role.

1st Strategy - Ask Questions

If you have a good idea that might help the group, don't withhold it. Instead, offer the idea as a question. For example, you can ask "What are the benefits of renting

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new computers as an interim strategy?" The group can then consider this option and accept or reject it. Your neutrality is maintained because you're not actually telling the group what to do. They still have the final say.

2nd Strategy - Offer Suggestions

Sometimes you'll have a good idea that the group has not considered, yet even when you pose it as a question it fails to make an impression. At this point, it's appropriate to ask the group to consider a suggestion from you. You might say: "What about exploring the potential of renting computers for the next six months, until your new budget is approved?" Although this might sound as if you've strayed into content, it's still facilitative as long as it sounds and feels like an offer, not an order. As long as the members retain the power to decide the issue, all you've done is help provide a new idea for their consideration.

3rd Strategy - Take off the Facilitator's Hat

If the group is about to make a serious mistake, and all of the questioning and suggesting in the world hasn't worked to dissuade them, you may need to step out of your neutral role and tell the group what to do. In cases like these, it's important to first signal that you're stepping out of the facilitator role and clearly state that you are now offering advice. You might say: "I need to step out of the role of facilitator for a minute and point out that renting computers is three times more cost effective than buying and doesn't stick you with outmoded hardware." This role shift is legitimate only if you truly believe that the group is in grave danger of making a major mistake and you absolutely have to help them. Be careful though: leaping in and out of the facilitator's role too often causes confusion and distrust. Taking off the hat should be done very selectively and cautiously.

Best and Worst Facilitator Practices

Some of the best things that a facilitator can do:

- carefully assess the needs of the members
- probe sensitively into people's feelings
- create an open and trusting atmosphere
- help people understand why they are there
- view yourself as a servant of the group's needs
- make members the center of attention
- speak in simple and direct language
- work hard to stay neutral
- display energy and appropriate levels of assertiveness
- champion ideas not personally favored
- treat all participants as equals
- stay flexible and ready to change direction if necessary
- make notes that reflect what participants mean
- listen intently to totally understand what is being said
- periodically summarize a complex array of ideas so that they form a coherent summary
- know how to use a wide range of discussion tools
- make sure every session ends with clear steps for the next meeting
- ensure that participants feel ownership for what has been achieved
- end on a positive and optimistic note

Some of the worst things a facilitator can do:

- remain oblivious to what the group thinks or needs
- never check group concerns
- not listen carefully to what is being said
- lose track of key ideas
- take poor flip-chart notes or change the meaning of what is said
- try to be the center of attention
- get defensive
- get into personality battles
- put down people
- unassertively manage conflict
- let a few people or the leader dominate

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- never check how the meeting is going
- be overly passive on process
- push ahead on an irrelevant agenda
- have no alternative approaches
- let discussions get badly sidetracked
- let discussions ramble without proper closure
- not know when to stop
- be insensitive to cultural diversity issues
- use inappropriate humor

Facilitator Behaviors and Strategies

Regardless of whether you're a facilitator from inside the group or out, the team's leader or a member; the following are parameters for facilitator behaviors.

Be Informed - Successful facilitators always gather extensive data about their prospective participants in order to fully understand both their business and their needs. They survey and interview participants, read background reports and use prepared questions to build a complete picture of the group's situation.

Be Optimistic - Facilitators do not allow disinterest, antagonism, shyness, cynicism or other negative reactions to throw them off. They try, instead, to focus on what can be achieved and to draw the best from each participant.

Be Consensual - Facilitation is fundamentally a consensus process. Facilitators always strive to create outcomes that reflect the ideas of all participants equally.

Be Flexible - Successful facilitators always have a process plan for all meetings, yet at the same time must be ready to toss it aside and change direction if that's what is needed. Really great facilitators bring alternative strategies and possess a good command of process tools.

Be Understanding - There are great pressures on employees in today's workplace. Facilitators need to understand this and recognize that antagonistic or cynical behaviors are a result of high stress levels.

Be Alert - All great facilitators are expert people watchers. They pay careful attention to group dynamics and notice what's going on at all times. All process leaders need to train themselves to be watchful of how people interact and how well they are achieving the task.

Be Firm - Good facilitation is not a passive activity. It often takes a substantial level of assertiveness to keep people and activities on track. Facilitators should be ready to step in and direct the process if the situation calls for it.

Be Unobtrusive - The facilitator should do as little talking as possible. The participants should be doing all of the talking. The facilitator says only enough to give instructions, stop arguments, keep things on track and sum up. Trying to be the center of attention or make yourself look important is a misuse of your position.

Special Note:

Facilitating should be an egoless activity. The purpose is to make the group succeed, not to make you look really important and clever. An effective facilitator will leave a group convinced that "We did it ourselves!"

Practice Feedback Sheets

An excellent way of getting better at facilitating is to ask a colleague to observe you in action and then give you feedback. On the next page is an observation sheet for feedback purposes. It focuses on core facilitation practices that are essential process requirements for any meeting. In using this sheet, the following feedback process can be helpful:

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1. First have the facilitator talk about how he or she felt he or she did. Ask, "What did you think were your strengths? Weaknesses? What do you think could be improved?"
2. Next, have the observer offer specific descriptions of all the things he or she noted that you did effectively.
3. Finally, have the observer provide concrete suggestions for improvements that he or she believes would enhance your facilitation effectiveness.

Facilitation Core Practices Observation Sheet

Behaviors That Help

- listens actively
- maintains eye contact
- helps identify needs
- gets buy-in
- surfaces concerns
- defines problems
- involves everyone in the discussion
- uses good body language & intonation
- paraphrases continuously
- provides feedback
- accepts and uses feedback
- checks time and pace
- provides useful feedback
- monitors and adjusts the process
- asks relevant, probing questions
- keeps an open attitude
- stays neutral
- offers suggestions
- is optimistic and positive
- manages conflict well
- takes a problem-solving approach
- stays focused on process
- Ping-Pongs ideas around
- makes accurate notes that reflect the discussion
- looks calm and pleasant
- is flexible about changing the approach used
- skillfully summarizes what is said
- knows when to stop

Behaviors That Hinder

- oblivious to group needs
- no follow-up on concerns
- poor listening
- strays into content
- loses track of key ideas
- makes poor notes
- ignores conflicts
- provides no alternatives for structuring the discussion
- gets defensive
- puts down people
- no paraphrasing
- lets a few people dominate
- never asks "How are we doing?"
- tries to be center of attention
- lets the group get sidetracked
- projects a poor image
- uses negative or sarcastic tone
- talks too much
- doesn't know when to stop