

Facilitation 101

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Abstract

While volumes have been written and graduate degrees offered on topics related to facilitation, the basic duties of a facilitator are to make sure everyone is working on the same challenge with the same approach, make sure everyone participates and protect participants from verbal abuse, and remain neutral and build trust. This paper provides the rudiments of doing this in a variety of groups and settings, hopefully providing a foundation on which more advanced facilitation learning and skills can be built.

What is a Facilitator?

There have been and will be many definitions of a facilitator. Webster defines "facilitation" as "increased ease of performance of any action." The company I work for defines it as "A process and group dynamics expert experienced in designing and leading group workshops and work sessions." I find the first a little too general and the second a little too restrictive. So here is my definition:

A group facilitator is someone who uses some level of intuitive or explicit knowledge of group process to formulate and deliver some form of formal or informal process interventions at a shallow or deep level to help a group achieve what they want or need to do or get where they want or need to go.

There are a lot of different practices included within that definition – from doing developmental intervention in regular meetings to running workshops to conducting experience-based training. It implies that facilitators can have different levels of knowledge and skill, can work on all kinds of problems and challenges, can be servant of the group in fulfilling its desire or can push the group to keep digging until they find what needs to be done or where they need to go. Most importantly, it recognizes as a real facilitator the meeting attendee who jumps up and starts writing on the chalk board the key points that are being discussed, or puts up a hand and suggests that the group focus on a single problem or find out a little about each other or agree on how they're going to make decisions, based on nothing more than an intuitive sense that something is amiss.

But when you're going to call yourself a facilitator, you need to have some solid foundation from which to work, or else you'll feel like just another group leader or just another note taker.

There are a few simple ways of doing this: a few things I do in almost every workshop, work session, or meeting that seems to make a big difference in meeting productivity. While volumes have been written and graduate degrees offered on each of these topics, the basics of facilitation are easily learned and provide a large measure of meeting improvement.

Facilitation is like playing the piano. You can practice the piano for years, learning new skills, pieces, and exercises and gaining experience and confidence. But when people want to sing "Happy Birthday" at a party, knowing what starting note is comfortable for a majority of people and being able to hit that one note on the piano makes a world of difference to how well the

group sings together. By the same token, the basics of facilitation make a world of difference in how well a group works together.

The following sections will give you enough basis to facilitate a meeting or work session "pretty well." From this, you'll find out 1) if this is something you want to do and are good at and 2) where you need to further develop your techniques, knowledge, and skills. For simplicity, I will assume that you are going to facilitate a straightforward meeting or problem solving session. While many other aspects of facilitation must be brought to bear for more complex situations like developmental facilitation, modeling and design workshops, T-groups, strategic planning, and organizational change, mastery and automatic, almost pre-conscious use of these basics will always be an important foundation.

Preparation

While much of what follows will be about what to do when you *don't* have a chance to prepare, I would be remiss if I didn't emphasize that, whenever you can, you should prepare before the session. Interview key players looking for themes, areas of agreement and contention, working styles, and hidden agendas. This will help you gain a sense of what to expect, as well as giving you an opportunity to let the participants know what to expect.

Prepare objectives and a high-level agenda and go over them with the sponsor or other key players. Then expand the agenda to a detailed facilitator's agenda, specifying time frames, techniques, exercises, and materials. Work with a colleague, professional group (such as a local facilitators organization or the GRP-FACL email list), or a knowledgeable client person to bounce ideas off or at least get a sanity check on your design.

Pay attention to room logistics; there are many good guidelines and checklists for room setup and logistic preparation. As a minimum, visit the room before the meeting (even if it's only 10 minutes before) and visualize how you will use the space -- whatever space you have.

Agenda and Objectives

Have an agenda and objectives. Post them on large charts in a prominent place. Use them as a frequent reminders: the objectives remind all that the group has a purpose in meeting and the agenda reminds them that some thought was given to how to achieve the purpose. When building your agenda, always know what you're going to do with the output of any activity or exercise.

If you don't know in advance what the meeting is about, the first thing you do with the group is gather ideas from them and build the charts. Ask people to state the problem and write down their proffered problem statements. Monitor the group responses to the ideas: sometimes one participant's way of stating the problem will resonate with the group, other times you will have to use voting or some other technique to prioritize the problems. At this and every other point, be explicit about getting the group to agree to the process. If you're going to vote, get consensus that voting is okay: otherwise find another way of coming to a choice.

It is key that you be sure the group understands that, while there may be many pressing problems, nothing will get done if they don't work on one problem at a time. They are only selecting the first one to work on, not the one and only one that they will ever get a chance to do anything about.

Once they've agreed to work on a problem, use a similar process to get them to agree on an approach to solving the problem. As you gain experience and knowledge as a facilitator, you will have a number of tools in your toolbox that you can offer as problem solving approaches. But I find it best to see if there are ideas from within the group. They will have greater understanding and ownership of something they're familiar with, and we cannot overemphasize the importance of buy-in.

In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu says, "Of the best leader, when the job is done the people say 'we did it ourselves.'"

At every opportunity, the skilled facilitator risks the group not recognizing her contribution by letting them provide not only all the content input but as much process input as possible. Besides, I find this is a great way for me to learn new techniques!

However you arrive at your objectives (problem statement) and agenda (way of proceeding), once you have them posted, get the group to agree to them. Give them a chance to add or modify objectives and agenda items. Once the group has agreed to the objectives and agenda, don't let participants stray from them for very long without asking the group to either return to working on them or explicitly agree to changes in them.

Basic Process Interventions

The basic duties of a facilitator are:

- Make sure everyone is working on the same problem with the same approach
- Protect participants and make sure everyone participates
- Remain neutral and build trust.

We've already addressed how to make sure that all are working on the same problem: objectives, agenda, and problem statements all help get participants focused on a single problem. In the next section we will discuss interventions based on the group memory to help bring participants back to the agreed-upon focus.

Use Exercises and Simple Techniques to Increase Participation and Creative Flow

Pose a framing question to the group and record it in the group memory: some large and visible representation of what the group is doing (more on that in a moment) Ask for ideas and get them into group memory. Use the rules of brainstorming, or just go around and have each person offer an idea (round robin). If there are some people who are not participating, it might be because they are more contemplative than others: they are processing more information, considering more perspectives, or carrying implications to a higher order. To give them a chance to take part, allow a few minutes for all to write down ideas (silent brainstorming) before the round robin, or have people write their ideas on sticky notes and then post them or hand them in (slip writing).

Play Traffic Cop

Some people may not be participating because of process blocking: they can't get a word in edgewise until the topic they wanted to contribute to is past. They will usually give you body language that they want to speak and it is your job to get them a break. Use hand signals, physical position, and verbal interruptions to prevent behaviors that limit participation, make participants feel threatened, or impede progress.

Evaluation Apprehension

Another reason participants might not contribute is that they are afraid their ideas will be ridiculed. Not only is this bad manners and a good way to lose the wisdom of some group members, it is also a big block to creativity. Place equal value on all ideas. Explain that there are no bad ideas. Some help open up creative flow, some help people explore how they feel about an issue, and some may turn out to be quite good, after a little modification. Some ideas seek to be self serving or disruptive, but can only be if you react to them or allow others to do so. Write down every idea

in group memory. Try to design your agenda so that idea generation (divergent thinking) is separated in time and psychically from idea evaluation and decision making (convergent thinking) so that it is clear when you're seeking blue-sky thinking and when practicality is important.

In the extreme, participants will be concerned about being ridiculed – or worse – for their ideas. Be quick and positive in putting a stop to personal abuse: do not allow negative comments against a group member to go unchallenged. Group memory will help in lessening comments about people, too! (Aren't you getting anxious to get on to group memory?)

Finally, there is the problem of John leaving the meeting and telling Joan's boss, "You should have heard the wacky idea Joan came up with in the meeting!" There is no guarantee that this won't happen. But to try and prevent it,

- Make sure everyone knows when wacky ideas are needed and the purpose they serve
- Try to get people to commit to non-attribution -- you can talk about what was said, but not who said it
- Get the group to tell you what they need from you and each other to feel safe.
- Get the group, before they leave, to agree on what story about the meeting they will tell to non-participants.

Disruptive Behaviors

Non-participation can take many forms besides not talking: disruptive behaviors such as interrupting, negativity, physically or mentally leaving, or dominating the conversation are all forms of non-participation. When you get this, practice the meditation on compassion. Most people are not rotten, they just get carried away or scared or excited or tired. One colleague says that 95% of this behavior comes from people who feel they haven't been heard or listened to, 3% from people who haven't learned where to find their "off" button, and 2% from people who have a destructive life script. You may not understand what is going on in their life to cause disruptive behavior, but you can learn to accept that there is something.

In our company course on Workshop and Facilitation Techniques, we assign participants to do disruptive behaviors during other participants' practices. One participant in the first class I taught chose a topic that was such a "hot button" for me that they thought I had assigned myself a disruptive behavior. That changed my perspective on disruptive participants.

Their problem may even be with something in your process: as servant of the group, you need to look at process changes or interventions that can meet this person's concerns, preserve their contribution, and allow the group to move forward. Here again, get tacit or explicit agreement from the group that this person's contributions are worth taking the time or making the changes! This is where you personally have to focus your own definition of facilitation a little more than the one I offered at the beginning: are you there to serve the immediate wants of the group, or longer-term, developmental needs? Either answer can be very right in some circumstances and very wrong in others.

Group Memory

Keep a running group memory. I first learned the term "group memory" from Doyle and Strauss, *How to Make Meetings Work*. They have a great description of what, how, and especially why it is.

The human brain is essentially a massively parallel processor. But for a group to work together, the *group* brain needs to be a serial processor. The group memory is the consciousness thread that is used to keep the group focused on working on one thing, and working on it in a logical sequence. Group memory is the stuff you post on the walls or otherwise collect where everyone can see it. It is where you keep all comments, ideas, discussion, agreements, thoughts, votes, and decisions, so each person can see what we're talking about now.

Group memory is more than just wall paper to let people see that you've done something:

It lets you refer back to stuff that's been done. If the group needs to stop progress and go back, the facilitator can physically go to that part of the group memory and refocus the group on what they were doing.

It keeps people focused on providing input that can be captured and processed, not just conversing and generalizing. This is key to moving from meetings where nothing gets done to meetings that have beneficial work products. Seeing some things they say get written down and others get lost helps the participants keep focused on making progress, not chatter.

It lets you capture thoughts and ideas during divergent thinking, then go back to those ideas during convergent thinking. A productive group often goes through a creative phase, where ideas flow without judgement. This is divergent thinking – moving away from what is current conventional wisdom. But to make a decision, they need to then do convergent thinking: come together on the one or few ideas they are going to implement. Group memory is essential to the flow back and forth between these two modes.

When the group is not working on the problem it agreed to work on, you can show in the record where they agreed to work on this problem and where they went astray. Then check if they want to agree to stay on this path or return to the path they originally agreed to. Get them to be explicit about what the new path is, and write that in the group memory.

When someone keeps harping on an idea, you can point to where it has been captured and say, "We've got it in the group memory. Any other ideas we need to get?"

Participants can "attack" positions shown in the group memory without abusing the person who originally proposed it. They can say, "See that idea there? I think a problem with it is..." instead of saying, "Jo, you're an idiot, that would never work."

When you decide to intervene on group behavior, you can indicate in the group memory the points where things happened that you are questioning.

When you're coming to consensus or voting on a motion, everyone can see exactly what they're agreeing or not agreeing to.

Being Your Own Best Intervention

As a facilitator, you bring three things to your practice: knowledge, skills, and Self.

Knowledge is a grounding in and working familiarity with the body of theory, research, concepts, and models pertaining to the field of group facilitation. This is the knowledge we gain from books, journals, conversations, dialogues, seminars, and other forms of study and learning (like this paper).

Skills are the practiced ability to act on, carry out, and support the actions and interventions prescribed by the theory that is in our knowledge base. This involves things like listening, presenting, observing, sensing, supporting, challenging, and diagnosing. Skills are developed through experiential learning; apprenticeships; and practice, practice, practice.

The *Self* is everything we are -- our beliefs, values, and life experiences as they become manifest in our attitudes, needs, and motives. In all of life, and especially in group facilitation, our *Self* determines our *ability* to use our knowledge and skills.

Of these three, the *Self* is the most important. No matter how much we know or how hard we practice, if we are blocked in applying the knowledge and skills we have developed it will

adversely impact our performance as facilitators. Conversely, there are people who, because of who they are, have a seemingly natural talent for helping a group achieve results even without the theory, even the first time they get in front of a group.

Use your presence to set a mood and tone for the meeting. If you are calm, the group will be calm. If you are hopeful, the group will be hopeful. If you are choiceful about when to intervene and what process to use and getting the group to agree to process issues, the group will be mindful of process. If you trust, the group will be trustworthy. If you play mind games, the group will play mind games. If you look for hidden meanings and subterfuges, they will be there. But if you are very clear in your communications and take the statements of others at their face value, they will begin to communicate clearly as well.

Keep Learning and Growing

This paper, and the session it supports, is intended only as an introduction for those who have heard of this thing called "facilitation" but have no idea what it is, or who have seen facilitators in action but think they're doing something mystical, or who have been called upon to "facilitate" a meeting and don't know what that means. If you think you are a facilitator, then find ways to keep learning and growing. Work on your knowledge with books and professional groups. Work on your skills with practice, apprenticeships, and experiential classes. And most of all, work on your Self. Remember back in "What is a facilitator?" I said that you would find out if facilitation is something you want to do and are good at? A friend said that readers might interpret that as saying good facilitation is genetic, not an acquired skill. The knowledge and skills can be acquired, but the Self takes much greater work. You have to decide how much work your Self needs and whether it's worth it.

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