

# Developing Facilitation Skills

## GETTING STARTED

The art of facilitation enables a group of people (as few as two) to reach an outcome for which they will take responsibility and to which they will be fully committed. The facilitator acts as a catalyst, creating the conditions for productive behavioral chemistry to take place.

Good facilitation skills require:

- careful observation
- active listening
- a good sense of timing
- sensitivity to overall group dynamics
- courage to allow the group to move into areas where the facilitator may not feel comfortable

From a values perspective, good facilitators desire to bring about an outcome that is in the best interests of all involved; they do not invest in an outcome that they have devised and believe is the best solution for the group or individual.

These qualities are hard to find in combination. Some people may possess a few of them and have the capacity to learn the rest; others may find coming up with the whole package more challenging.

## FAQs

**When there is a clear objective to be reached, isn't it awfully indulgent to give space to the group to determine its own path? Wouldn't it be better to guide and advise them along the way?**

Time and direction are definitely considerations in facilitating a group. However, if you don't allow group members to create a solution for themselves, they probably won't be fully behind the outcome. The facilitator's influencing role is therefore very important. A good facilitator can carefully question and probe to help people think through issues in a way that enables them to move through the process efficiently, covering all the points the facilitator knows need to be addressed.

## **I enjoy the role of facilitator but often find that there's at least one dissenter in the group who makes things difficult for the others. What's the best way of dealing with this?**

If you see someone as being disruptive, it's almost certain that the group will too. If you manage to withhold your intervention long enough, you will probably find that the group finds a way of dealing with this. If the situation becomes heated, however, you may wish to call a time out and facilitate a discussion about the dynamics that have emerged. If you have a time constraint, that's another good reason to prompt a review and provide the space to deal with the situation. Calling for a review or taking time out are two important tools of a facilitator.

## **Groups have been forming unaided for years. Why should a facilitator be needed?**

Group development is a natural process that has several distinct phases. If left to their own devices, groups often take a long time to form and create casualties along the way. A good facilitator can ease this process through careful observation and timely interventions. The facilitator's role is to highlight what's going on and enable the group members to take action and learn more about themselves and their part in the process.

## **MAKING IT HAPPEN**

There are many forms of facilitation. They range from the totally unstructured approach, unconfined by time (Open Space Technology), to approaches in which clear boundaries are placed around the activity. *Facilitation* here is used to mean the art of accompanying a group as it reaches a consensus and conclusion.

### **Understanding the Stages of Group Formation**

It is helpful for the facilitator to understand the stages that a group goes through before it can work honestly and constructively as a unit. Broadly there are four such stages, identified by Bruce Tuckman (see below) as *forming, storming, norming, and performing*.

- **Forming.** During the forming stage, members of the group test the water to find out which behaviors are and aren't acceptable. Some may act extra nice in order to avoid conflict, while more dominant members may exhibit a preference for their own way of doing things. High levels of energy typically accompany this stage, but usually it's not directed productively. People who like to take time to make up their minds may be pretty quiet or, if they happen to speak, may be flattened by more forceful colleagues. At this stage each member of the group is circling the others, learning about their styles, pondering the team's goal, and determining how to reach it.

- **Storming.** The storming phase often gets raucous and uncomfortable as tempers fray over the difficulty of the task, the team's perceived lack of progress, and the lack of direction the group is receiving from a recognized authority within or outside the group. People start to tell each other what to do and reject other's points of view, often on emotional grounds. Some get defensive, others aggressive, and the group may fragment as members strike up allegiances and invest in a particular stance.
- **Norming.** This phase is accompanied by enthusiasm and focused, productive effort. Opposing views begin to be reconciled as members recognize and value each other's contribution. The rules of engagement become clear, and constructive criticism ensures that the group maintains focus on the task and functions effectively.
- **Performing.** In the performing stage, lots of work gets done as the group begins to operate as a cohesive unit. Members are prepared to learn about themselves, adjust their behaviors and relinquish personal goals for the sake of the team. Very often strong bonds are created when a group has been through these four stages of development, and relationships may endure long after the purpose of forming the group has disappeared.

### **Making Helpful Interventions**

The role of a facilitator requires an understanding of the group formation process and the courage to allow it to take place. Some interventions may accelerate group development, but no stage can be avoided totally. Suitable interventions may include:

- reflecting back observations or perceptions to the group, rather than providing answers outright;
- asking pertinent questions that provoke thought;
- listening actively to what is being said.

The ability to sense the ebb and flow of energy and move with it and influence its direction is a useful skill for a facilitator to have. It often comes from experience and a level of self-knowledge that enables the facilitator to distinguish which reactions are born of his or her own fears and vulnerabilities and which are relevant to the workings of the group.

### **Introducing Review Sessions**

Suspending the proceedings and leading a group review session often creates an objective awareness of what is happening and allows the group to agree on a way to proceed. The timing of such reviews is critical; it's easy to disturb the balance between moving the group through the four phases of development and getting the task done.

## **Dealing with Difficult People**

Many, perhaps most, groups include one or more difficult person. Very often these people get confronted during the natural process of group development, but there may be occasions when taking them to one side and having a coaching session is the best solution. The facilitator can tell whether coaching is necessary or whether leaving the difficult people in the group will enable them to learn more about their own style and behavior. The ideal way for people to gain self-knowledge is for them to truly experience themselves through others' reactions and comments, then come to their own conclusions.

## **Remembering the Facilitator's Three Roles**

Notwithstanding all the qualities that are desirable in a good facilitator, the facilitator's task can be thought of as three separate functions:

- to enhance the learning experience of the group through timely interventions and to create a safe environment in which the constructive exchange of feedback can take place;
- to enable the group to step back, observe itself, theorize, and experiment with new ways of doing things;
- to give group members a good understanding of their own learning process. Once we understand how we learn, we can consciously turn many different kinds of situations into learning experiences.

## **COMMON MISTAKES**

### **Leading, Not Guiding**

Many people mistake the art of facilitation for leading or directing a group toward a desired end. But if the group hasn't committed itself to that particular end, its members are likely to disengage from the process. The best way to make group members feel committed to a common cause is to establish a consensus at the outset, and then check regularly along the way to confirm that members are still on board and satisfied with their progress.

### **Intervening Too Soon**

Group development can get messy, and new facilitators tend to jump in too soon with an intervention to try and calm the situation. Mistimed interventions can inhibit the group from moving through the four developmental stages and prevent it from resolving whatever issues have emerged. Facilitators need to be able to draw a fine line between making an early intervention and allowing things to deteriorate to the point of group collapse.

## **Not Controlling Feedback**

Encouraging the group to give constructive feedback is important, as it paves the way for a high-performing team. It can become a destructive activity, however. Make sure that feedback is based on observed behavior and that people take responsibility for their own comments. This means the use of “I” statements, balancing critical feedback with positive observations, and being open to offering alternative strategies.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

### **Books:**

Cameron, Esther. *Facilitation Made Easy*. 2nd ed. Milford, CT: Kogan Page, 2001.

Heron, John. *The Complete Facilitator's Handbook*. Milford, CT: Kogan Page, 1999.

Hunter, Dale, Anne Bailey, and Bill Taylor. *The Facilitation of Groups*. Brookfield, VT: Gower, 1998.

Justice, Thomas, et al. *The Facilitator's Fieldbook: Step-by-step Procedures, Checklists and Guidelines, Samples and Templates*. New York: AMACOM, 1999.

Owen, Harrison. *Expanding Our Now: The Story of Open Space Technology*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 1997.

Schwarz, Roger. *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers and Coaches*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002.

### **Web Sites:**

Facilitation Company—information, ideas, and references:

[www.facilitationcompany.com](http://www.facilitationcompany.com)

International Facilitation Association: <http://www.iaf-world.org/issue3front.htm>

The Management Assistance for Non-Profits:

[http://www.mapnp.org/library/grp\\_skill/theory/theory.htm](http://www.mapnp.org/library/grp_skill/theory/theory.htm)

Tuckman's teamwork questionnaire: [www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/teamsuv.html](http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/teamsuv.html)

Tuckman's theory of forming, norming, storming, performing:

[www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/leadtem2.html](http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/leadtem2.html)