

## Becoming a Better Facilitator

By BNET Editorial

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Facilitation skills don't come easily. They require awareness, sensitivity, and an understanding of *process*. They also require courage because sometimes you need to let the process "go to the edge" to create value for the people who are learning from it.

Often, the task of facilitation is given to someone who happens to be chairing a meeting, leading a project, or running a team. But these may not be the best-qualified people for the job. If they fear conflict, they'll likely block the process' potential creativity. If they're dominant, they may quell contributors who could have good suggestions or ideas to offer. If they don't manage the energy of the group sufficiently, they may demoralize some and give too much space to others.

Good facilitators root out sabotaging, domineering, or passive behaviors. They listen well and attend to emerging issues swiftly; and they ensure the group meets its agenda within the allotted timeframe. A good facilitator acts as a catalyst—someone who creates the right mix for good chemistry but doesn't leave his or her own chemical marker. Indeed, when a group or team has been well facilitated, the members often don't know it!

### What You Need to Know

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#### **I have been asked to facilitate a team meeting in the absence of the team leader. What are the most important things I have to do to ensure success?**

It may be helpful to set the boundaries and terms of engagement at the outset of the meeting. Introduce yourself and confirm the role that you will be taking. State the purpose of the meeting and confirm the agenda and the timings. Once the practicalities are out of the way, you can manage the team members' expectations by stating the approach you are going to take and the behavioral expectations you have of them. This is a strong intervention and creates the reference points that you can return to if necessary.

#### **I have a sense that people are not saying what they think in my team meetings and that there is an undercurrent of discontent. What can I do to address this?**

You are probably picking up on the body language and the pointed silences or reluctant agreements. This is either passive or passive/aggressive behavior and it is indicative of people feeling powerless and fearful of confronting issues openly. It may be a broader organizational issue but ask yourself if it

is to do with your style of facilitation. Are you being too dominant or too critical? If this is the case, try sharing your perceptions and invite team members to air their thoughts and feelings openly.

### **I try to raise the energy of meetings by being light-hearted and humorous but I have been given feedback that this is not helpful. Surely I don't have to be serious all the time to be an effective facilitator?**

Humor is a great tool but used inappropriately it can grate and make people feel as if they are not being taken seriously. Use your humor economically. If it is dry or sarcastic, a little goes a long way!

### **I get really worried when things start to get heated in my meetings. What can I do to make sure things don't get out of control?**

Ironically, it is this kind of chaotic energy that brings creativity and novelty to solutions and agreements. Try to hold your nerve and let things go as far as you can before calling order. If things start getting negative, intervene and call a "timeout" before reconvening and inviting a more constructive approach.

## **What to Do**

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The art and science of good facilitation leads to excellent processes and performance. Without facilitation, communications, relationships, meetings, and events may not take place effectively. Without facilitation, knowledge and experience may neither be shared nor serve to improve creativity, productivity, and success.

In the absence of facilitation, things that should have been said are often left unsaid and ideas that should have been shared remain hidden. However, in the presence of good facilitation, a whole wealth of thoughts and ideas are unleashed and energy is available for imaginative engagement and creative invention.

In successfully facilitated meetings, groups, or events, by far the greatest proportion of the facilitator's attention is placed upon the *process* not the content. It is not the facilitator's business to take an expert stance but to facilitate an original outcome based on a rich exchange of participant's thoughts, ideas, and experiences.

## Learn the Role the Facilitator Plays

As we know, facilitators are responsible for *process*. Their talent qualifies them to hold meetings, conduct work teams and preside over focus or discussion groups in order to reach a particular point or outcome. They often keep an eye on the clock to make sure that time is used properly and that the meeting or discussion stays on track. They also ensure that everyone has the airtime they need to contribute their best efforts.

At the outset of a meeting, a facilitator will generally make explicit the “rules” or terms of engagement. This will form the basis of the “contract” with the group and provide a touchstone to which the facilitator can return when things get a bit messy or chaotic. This includes such things as: decision-making processes, etiquette between group members and matters of confidentiality. In addition, facilitators often carry the uncomfortable task of managing conflict and making sure that it becomes creative rather than destructive. The facilitator will contract this at the outset, too. Such a contract would probably include: ensuring that both sides are heard, that each person’s perspective is understood, and that the good ideas caught up in the crossfire are aired.

Finally, facilitators will ensure the purpose of the exercise is achieved. They will usually summarize and confirm the outcome and ensure that everyone is in agreement with what has taken place and what needs to be done to move things forward.

## Determine Whether You Could Fill the Role

Facilitators come in all sorts of guises. You may be called into a facilitation role as a trainer who wishes to facilitate learning in a personal or professional setting. You may be a consultant who uses facilitation to draw information from his or her clients or you may be a line manager or team leader who is creating the process by which work targets can be achieved efficiently and effectively. You may also be someone who uses his or her facilitation skills to collect feedback for evaluation purposes; this may be evaluation of a product, program, or market. And you may be a parent who is facilitating the development of your child. This is facilitation in a very true sense!

## Learn What Makes a Good Facilitator

As facilitators work with *process*, they often pick up on the nuances of a situation and detect messages that are unspoken as well as picking up on signals that are subtle or even unseen. A good facilitator is aware of the dynamics of a group and will be able to interpret the body language of members.

If you want to know whether or not you’d make a good facilitator, ask yourself if you are able to:

- trigger and open a communicative atmosphere;

- “break the ice” and use humor to diffuse situations;
- put your investment in the outcome aside and focus on bringing a solution out of the group;
- remain engaged even when bored or frustrated;
- listen attentively—that means dropping assumptions and suspending judgment;
- show respect for differences;
- manage conflict;
- think rapidly and respond to unexpected situations;
- give and receive feedback;
- be the “fall guy” and receive all the frustrations that may emerge in the dynamics of the group;
- ask open questions—these are the “who?”, “what?”, “where?”, “how?”, “why?” questions that characterize a good coach.

## Learn What Is *Not* the Role of a Facilitator

A facilitator is not someone who will reinterpret a message or signal based on his or her own agenda. Nor is a facilitator someone who filters what has been said or ignores ideas that appear “foolish” or inconvenient. A facilitator’s role is “content free” and one which is genuinely concerned with harvesting all that is best within the team or group. Indeed, he or she may enter the facilitation role with complete non-attachment to the outcome.

A facilitator is not there to rescue situations when they get a bit heated nor are they there to fix problems based on their own preferences for a solution.

Facilitation is not a wordy role; most of the emphasis is placed upon observing and intervening lightly when an aspect of the process requires refocusing. If you are speaking more than anyone else, you may find that it is because you are anxious, invested in the outcome, or fearful of conflict.

As a facilitator, it is not your business to have the answers, manipulate a particular outcome, or “be popular.” You are making a *process* difference, not a solution difference.

## What to Avoid

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### You Act as Judge and Jury

Often, experts take the facilitation role and act as both judge and jury when ideas or suggestions are made in a meeting. It is important to remember that a good facilitator does not need to be a content expert. Indeed, this can get in the way. As the “expert” facilitator calls on his or her knowledge and experience to critically appraise inputs from the group, he or she can prevent novel ideas from coming

to the fore. Try to put your expertise in the back of your mind if you are in this position. Allow as many ideas to flow as possible. It is the flow that is interesting at the outset, not the viability of the ideas. Stem the flow, and the good ideas that are set to emerge will be silenced.

## **You Get Frustrated**

People who have facilitation thrust upon them and do not understand the finer aspects of good facilitation may get frustrated when things take longer than they would like. If this happens, good ideas are cut off at the bud stage and not allowed to flower into something useful. If you are not naturally inclined toward facilitation, try to find someone who has this propensity and use them to facilitate the group—of which you can be a contributing member.

## **You Become Involved as a Participant**

Getting involved in the content and not remaining dispassionate can be a pitfall of facilitation. By and large, you are there to harvest the ideas of others, not to impose your own. Remember to focus on your role and try not to get sucked in as a participant.

## **You Let Your Ego Get Involved**

Facilitation is an “invisible” function and for those who have large egos and like to be associated with success, it may not be an attractive occupation. Good facilitators are quite happy to take a back seat when the praise is being dished out and not elbow their way to the front of the line to receive an accolade!

## **Where to Learn More**

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### **Books:**

Bens, Ingrid, *Facilitating with Ease!*. 2nd Rev Ed. Pfeiffer Wiley, 2005.

Frances, Christine, *Practical Facilitation: A Toolkit of Techniques*. Kogan Page, 2003.

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

Schwarz, Roger M., *The Skilled Facilitator Fieldbook*. Pfeiffer Wiley, 2005.

Sims, Nikki Highmore, *How to Run a Great Workshop: The Complete Guide to Designing and Running Brilliant Workshops and Meetings*. Prentice Hall, 2006.

Wilkinson, Michael, *The Secrets of Facilitation: The S.M.A.R.T. Guide to Getting Results With Groups*. Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Straus, David, and Thomas C. Layton, *How to Make Collaboration Work: Powerful Ways to Build Consensus, Solve Problems, and Make Decisions*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002.

West, Edie, *Big Book of Icebreakers: 50 Quick, Fun Activities for Energizing Meetings and Workshops*. McGraw-Hill Education, 1999.

## **Web Sites:**

Free Management Library: [www.managementhelp.org/grp\\_skill/faciltate/faciltate.htm](http://www.managementhelp.org/grp_skill/faciltate/faciltate.htm)

Facilitate.com: [www.facilitate.com/Facilitation10Tips.html](http://www.facilitate.com/Facilitation10Tips.html)