

Accelerating Progress Through Effective Facilitation

The Facilitator's Roles



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Facilitation skills are such a valuable tool and can be used in many routine settings: staff and board meetings, decision making, problem solving, formal and informal focus groups, community conversations, strategic planning and board / staff / volunteer development. Being able to bring out the opinions and thoughts of all involved and accurately reflect them back to the group is a great skill to have and can be developed with a basic understanding of the facilitator's role and LOTS of practice.

Master of Neutrality – 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. Top facilitators separate neutrality from passivity. Challenge assumptions and questionable arguments to avoid the dangers of “group think.” Offer alternative ideas in order to get the group to consider a different course of action, but avoid the perception of bias by soliciting the benefits of all sides.

If you have a strong opinion you want voiced or care about / have a stake in the outcome, you should not be the Facilitator for that process.

Provide processes to use time efficiently – There are many techniques to which allow groups to discuss and come to consensus in a short period of time. Some of these are nominal group technique, progressive discussion and using post-it notes to generate ideas.

Help the group define its overall goal – Asking the group's expectations at the beginning of the meeting helps frame the rest of the discussion and is a good report card to measure success at the end of the meeting.

Listen actively – Look people in the eye. Use attentive body language and paraphrase what they say. 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 who can speak next, and to prompt the quiet ones in the crowd to participate.

You can also use eye contact to encourage group discussion. There are times you want the participants to look at each other, not to you. In those cases, look around the room at the participants rather than at the speaker. Soon, the participants will be looking at the speaker rather than you.

Use silence effectively – Pause after you ask a question. Give people time to think. People are generally uncomfortable with silence and eventually someone will speak up. Don't rush it every time.

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 symptoms to get at root causes.

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. “*Are you saying...? Am I understanding you to mean... ?*”

Synthesize ideas – 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. *"Alice, what would you add to Jeff's comments?"*

Give and receive feedback – Periodically *"hold up a mirror"* to help the group *"see"* itself so it can make corrections. (i.e. *"Only two people are engaged in this discussion, while three others are reading. What's this telling us we need to do?"*) Also ask for and accept feedback about the facilitation. *"Are we making progress? How's the pace? What can I do to be more effective?"*

Encourage full participation – All voices should be heard, including the naysayer, the negative, the introvert, the employee intimidated by the CEO.

Test assumptions – 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. *"Mary, on what basis are you making the comment that 'Bob's idea is too narrow in focus'?"*

Collect ideas – Keep track of both emerging ideas and final decisions. Make clear and accurate summaries on a flipchart or electronic board so everyone can see the notes. Notes should be brief and concise. They must always reflect what the participants actually said, rather than your interpretation of what they said.

Identify objectives and plans – If it's high level brainstorming, this might not be necessary. But if the end result is going to be a plan, help the group drill down to be as specific as possible: how will this idea get us where we want to go. Who's going to have to do what and when?

Take accurate notes – Preferably, take notes on a flip chart or electronic board where everyone, especially the speaker, can see that you are accurately capturing thoughts. Notes are not the time to paraphrase.

Promote mutual understanding – Help people of different viewpoints reach a mutual understanding, not necessarily agreement. *"John, can you use your own words to describe Mary's position? Mary, I'll have you do the same with John's position in a moment."*

Foster inclusive solutions – *"We have three interesting ideas here. Can we use parts of each to come up with a new solution?"*

Teach new thinking skills – Offer different approaches to thinking about problems and solutions. Ask participants to take on different roles and look at the problem from a different perspective. Ask someone who is in favor of a position to switch roles and consider negative consequences. Challenge participants to use both sides of their brain.

Summarize clearly – 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.

Stay on track – Set time guidelines for each discussion. Appoint a time keeper inside the group to use a timer and call out milestones. 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. *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.

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