

Facilitate Instead Of Manage A Problem-Solving Meeting¹

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One of the tasks of a manager is to conduct meetings to solve particular problems. All too often in such meetings, managers *manage*, running the meeting as the authority, the commandant. I have found that it is far more effective for them to *facilitate* such a meeting, rather than manage it.

Facilitating invites collaboration. Collaboration stimulates involvement. Involvement builds a sense of participant ownership of any solutions reached. Ownership increases the chances that the solutions will be successfully implemented.

What is a facilitator?

People bring their different personalities into a problem-solving meeting. Some are more willing to talk and express themselves, while others are quiet and have to be asked before they speak. Some become quiet and sullen when they get angry, while others get defensive or attack others when they are upset. Some people come to a meeting with “hidden agendas”—personal reasons for arguing for a particular idea—and they end up not listening to other people in the meeting. Given these differences, every problem-solving meeting needs someone to facilitate discussions, someone who will make sure the meetings stay focused and run smoothly.



A facilitator is a catalyst, guiding the group in getting its work done. The facilitator monitors discussions so people do not violate agreed upon rules. For example, a rule in “brainstorming” is that no one is to judge or evaluate any ideas as they are offered to the group. If someone does start judging, the facilitator steps in to remind everyone of the rules.

Some Guidelines for Facilitators

Following are some basic guidelines for facilitation:

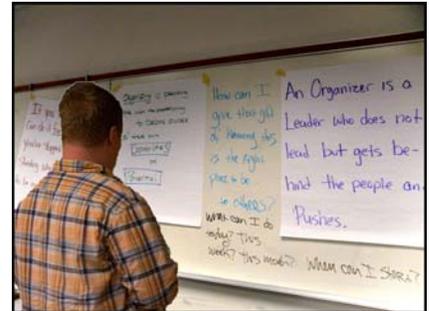
- ***Facilitators stay more focused on the way people interact with each than getting involved with the content of the discussion.*** They act as a “third party,” striving to be unbiased and neutral. They focus on the content only when it repeats itself, goes in circles, doesn’t stay in focus, etc. The biggest temptation of managers acting as facilitators is to want to contribute to the group, to give their own ideas for solving the problem at hand, etc. They must stay focused on truly hearing and understanding what people are saying and only offer ideas when on one else is doing so.
- ***Collaboration is strengthened by using group members as facilitators.*** In the long run, the more that different people in a group serve as the facilitator, the less is the need for a true facilitator because group members learn to facilitate themselves and all become active listeners. (However, they still need one person to keep track of the discussion, preferably on flip charts.)



¹ From: http://www.arniedahlke.com/120831_Facilitate_Instead_Of_Manage_A_Problem-Solving_Meeting.pdf
Take a moment to explore Arnie’s other Timely Tips at: <http://www.arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm>

- ***The use of flip charts in meetings deserves special attention.*** Flip charts are immensely helpful to a problem-solving group when used correctly. Their first purpose is to capture a running summary of the points being made during the meeting. But then, instead of simply turning the flip chart page over when it is full (as most people do), the facilitator tapes or pins each completed sheet, one after the other, on the wall in full sight of the group. This serves four very important purposes:

- First, as the meeting unfolds and the flip chart pages accumulate on the wall, group members can actually see their progress in moving toward their objectives. That visual reminder does wonders toward reinforcing each person's ownership and pride in what is being accomplished. Invariably, at the end of a problem-solving meeting, people will look around the walls and say things like: "Boy, look at the work we've accomplished today—we really got a lot done and that's a great feeling!"



- Second, displaying flip charts as the meeting progresses stimulates everybody to participate. Noticing that his or her contribution is not evident on the flip charts prods a group member to jump into the goings-on.

- Third, using flip charts insures that all group members are really being heard. If the facilitator does not accurately record what has been said on a chart, someone in the group, particularly the person who said it, will challenge what has been recorded and explain how it should really be written.

- Fourth, and very important, the flip charts pasted up on a wall serve as a reference for the facilitator. If a group should get into circular arguments or go over the same old items again and again, the facilitator can remind them by pointing it out on the appropriate page on the wall.

- ***The flip chart technique calls for the facilitator to be very skilled at active listening:*** he or she must immediately and accurately capture (clarifying when necessary) the essence of the ideas offered without interfering with the flow of the discussion.

- ***Facilitators suspend their judgments.*** Everything they hear is neutral. While they are facilitating, they suspend their own beliefs and assumptions. They hear only words and ideas without any judgments. They hear only the words they are recording on a flip chart. The words people utter flow through facilitators, through their hands onto a flip chart sheet. They listen and write—in fact, their listening is several words ahead of their writing. It's a skill that can be developed. This is a very important frame of mind for a facilitator.

- ***The main job of a facilitator is to maintain a "productive group climate"*** throughout group discussions. A productive group climate is a problem-solving atmosphere in which people:

Keep their focus on coming up with a solution to a problem instead of why something won't work

Talk about issues with uncritical attitudes, not critical attitudes

Actively listen to others instead of pushing their own agendas and telling others what to do

Maintain an open and objective state-of-mind

Enable and help others develop ideas

- ***Facilitators pay attention to nonverbal cues when maintaining a productive group climate.*** They continuously observe tone of voice, voice intonations and inflections, facial expressions, body language, etc. With practice, they learn to infer from these observations whether someone is being defensive, is irritated, withholding, etc. They then act as diplomats, using patience, tact and even humor to maintain a team climate.



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