

THE ART OF FACILITATING

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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. 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.

Guidelines For Facilitators

- ◆ *Facilitators establish rapport with members of the group. To do so, they must overcome three*
- ◆ *barriers:*
 - The first barrier is the *outsider barrier*. During my years of practice as a facilitator, I’ve found one of the first reactions when people meet with me for the first time is to see me as an outsider. They often adopt a standoff stance. “You are not part of this business—how can you possibly understand what we are up against?” “How can you possibly know about all of the little things I’m faced with and am up against every day?”
 - The second barrier is the *expert barrier*. Some people—particularly those who are new or insecure in their jobs—are fearful. “He’s an expert. He’ll see right through me and spot my weaknesses.” As a result, they are less open, more defensive, and may be threatened by my presence in a meeting—particularly if it deals with very sensitive issues.
 - The third barrier is the *management barrier*. Upon first meeting me, people see me as allied with management. It was management, after all, who hired me. Those most insecure often are afraid that I will report back all of their deficiencies to management and put them in a bad light.

I find it very helpful in establishing rapport to interview each group participant before the meeting takes place. Establishing rapport in such a one-on-one setting helps me overcome these three barriers. It gives me an opportunity to connect with the participants, to ease their fears. It allows me to develop a bond of trust and show them that I am someone

who is genuinely interested in their betterment—*not* someone who is evaluating them and reporting back to management.

- ◆ ***Facilitators stay more focused on the way people interact with each other 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 people acting as facilitators who are also members of the group is to want to contribute to the group, to give their own ideas for solving the problem at hand, etc. They must avoid too much focus on the content, and stay focused on truly hearing and understanding what a person is saying.
- ◆ ***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 facilitator actively listens.*** This means he or she *immediately* and *accurately* captures (clarifying when necessary) the essence of the ideas offered without interfering with the flow of the discussion.
- ◆ ***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 a solution won’t work
 - Maintain an open and objective state-of-mind.
 - Talk about issues objectively as problems to be solved, rather than framing them in finger-pointing and blaming language.
 - Actively listen to others instead of pushing their own agendas and telling others what to do.
 - Enable and help others develop ideas.
 - Recognize the interdependence of group members in arriving at solutions to problems that are best for the group.
- ◆ ***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 the team climate.
- ◆ ***When a group member facilitates, his or her primary job is to guide the group discussion and only offer ideas when no one else is doing so.*** 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.)

- ◆ ***The use of flip charts in team meetings deserves special attention.*** Flip charts are immensely helpful to a team when used correctly. The facilitator uses them to capture a running summary of the points being made during a meeting. But then, *instead of simply turning the flip chart page over when it is full (as most people do), he or she tapes or pins each completed sheet, one after the other, on the wall in full sight of the team.* This serves four very important purposes:
 - **First**, as the meeting unfolds and the flip chart pages accumulate on the wall, team members can actually *see* their progress in moving toward their objectives. That visual reminder does wonders toward reinforcing each team member's ownership and pride in what is being accomplished. Invariably, at the end of a team meeting, people will look around the walls and say things like: "Boy, look at the work we've done today—we really made a lot of progress—sure feels good!"
 - **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 team member to jump into the goings-on.
 - **Third**, using flip charts insures that all team 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**, the flip charts pasted on a wall serve as a reference for the facilitator. If a team 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*.**