

The Role of The Facilitator- Understanding What Facilitators Really DO!

Definition

A facilitator is an individual whose job is to help to manage a process of information exchange. The facilitator's role is to help with HOW the discussion is proceeding. In short, the facilitator's responsibility is to address the journey, rather than the destination. A facilitation approach is appropriate when the organization is concerned not only with the decision that is made, but also with the way the decision is made.

Competencies & Characteristics

If you are involved in facilitation (even if you've never called it that), or may be involved, you might want to consider the competencies and characteristics of an effective facilitator.

Competencies

The facilitator:

- distinguishes process from content
- manages the client relationship and prepares thoroughly
- uses time and space intentionally
- is skilled in evoking participation and creativity
- practiced in honoring the group and affirming its wisdom
- capable of maintaining objectivity
- skilled in reading the underlying dynamics of the group
- releases blocks to the process
- adapts to the changing situation
- assumes (or shares) responsibility for the group journey
- demonstrates professionalism, self-confidence and authenticity
- maintains personal integrity

Characteristics

The facilitator commits to a style of:

- asking rather than telling
- paying personal compliments
- willing to spend time in building relationships rather than always being task-oriented
- initiating conversation rather than waiting for someone else to
- asking for other's opinions rather than always having to offer their own
- negotiating rather than dictating decision-making
- listening without interrupting
- emoting but able to be restrained when the situation requires it
- drawing energy from outside themselves rather than from within
- basing decisions upon intuitions rather than having to have facts
- has sufficient self-confidence that they can look someone in the eye when talking to them
- more persuasive than sequential
- more enthusiastic than systematic
- more outgoing than serious
- more like a counselor than a sergeant

- more like a coach than a scientist
- is naturally curious about people, things and life in general
- can keep the big picture in mind while working on the nitty-gritty

Conclusion

If you have a natural task-oriented style you may find it difficult to be thrust in a situation where facilitating is a more effective approach. It isn't always easy to give up the expert position in a group. You may find it useful to examine your involvement in group activities, whether as a formal leader or group member, and determine if you can translate the above characteristics and competencies into changes in your behavior that will allow you to contribute more effectively to the group, and to achieving your organization's goals.

Planning and Strategy Meetings A Short Facilitation Guide

This is a facilitator's guide for running a group working session designed to develop a strategy for dealing with an understood problem. It is best suited for groups who have an established identity, and have worked together for some period of time. It is a set of questions the facilitator can use to structure the actual working sessions.

The time required for each section will vary depending on the history of the group, the complexity of the problem area, the maturity of the group members, the nature of their interpersonal dynamics, and the number of people in the group. At minimum, more time can be used in a session that lasts several hours. Often such sessions, especially if they involve 8 – 12 people, may take 1 to 2 full working days.

The guide is set up as a series of questions. Each of these questions structures a working session among the group members. Their dialogue should be documented on flipcharts, or using an overhead projector. This way they can see how their contributions build upon one another. The facilitator must manage the content and process if the session is to succeed.

The working notes should be returned to the participants as quickly as possible. (They can edit transcripts taken from the flipcharts or direct prints coming out of the computer software used to run the overhead computer projector.) In the best-case scenario, the people would leave the session with a copy of the projected computer file in their hands.

The session outline can be viewed as addressing the three strategic planning questions:

- Where are we? (Steps 2, 2, 3)
- Where do we want to be? (Steps 4, 5, 6)
- How do we get there from here? (Steps 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, & 14)

SESSION OUTLINE

1. What are we here to accomplish?

- The start-up of the session is often best done by the problem owner or business sponsor.
- It can be as short as a few minutes of verbal introduction and as long as a 10 to 15 minute formal presentation by this individual. The rest of the participants essentially listen.

- When the problem owner/business sponsor is finished, the facilitator should take some time to ask the other participants to state their version of the problem. Out of this dialogue, the facilitator will need to recommend a single problem statement in no more than 1 to 3 sentences. The facilitator will then poll each of the members to indicate publicly whether or not they are prepared to work on this problem statement for the rest of the session. If yes, move to the next section. If no, refine the problem statement until the participants are willing to do so. Generating this level of public commitment is absolutely essential to maintaining participants' involvement in the rest of the session.
- They must:
 - Be working on “their problem”, even if this is simply their restatement of the session sponsor's issue.
 - They must be working on the same problem. The polling and cycling is needed to ensure this.
 - Unwillingness to commit to the other participants must become an open issue now. If glossed over now, it will simply resurface again later on. When it does it will be experienced as frustrating and annoying. Once people have committed to work on something, they can change their mind later on. But it tends to be experienced as “more” contributory and meaningful if they have made a commitment to work together at the beginning of the session.

2. What is the current state?

- Data on the current state is best gathered by asking the participants to quickly brainstorm all the things they see as defining the current state of affairs.
- This is done so that the facilitator can summarize this information in 1 to 3 sentences. Once again, the facilitator should check with the participants to make sure that they agree that this is an accurate current state statement.

3. What are the COMPELLING threats, what are the COMPELLING reasons to PUSH forward from the present state?

- The facilitation process described under the previous section is used again and again.
- Therefore, it is summarized here and then assumed in all of the following sessions.
- The process can be summarized as:
 - state the question,
 - brainstorm or dialogue,
 - summarize the results in 1 to 3 full English sentences,
 - poll the members to see if they can concur or can move ahead based on this summary,
 - if yes – move to the next step,
 - if no – recycle through dialogue to refine the summary until they can.

4. What is the future state to which we need to move?

5. What are the COMPELLING reasons to be there, what are the compelling things that are PULLING us to this state?

6. What are the major gaps between the current state and the future state?

7. What major activities or thrusts are needed to close each of the gaps?

8. Who are the stakeholders, that is the individuals, who are impacted by the actions needed to close the gaps?

9. What are the critical success factors that must be addressed if we are to reach the future state?

- At this point the facilitator should introduce a definition of critical success factors. The best definition to use is as follows:
 - A critical success factor is something which all of the individuals who are involved in a situation or problem see as being critical to the success of an effort.
 - There should be no more than 3 to 5 of them. They are the most important issues NOT all of the issues.
 - They need to be stated in observable language. That is all of the individuals involved in the situation should be able to read the critical success factors and say, “Yes, I can see where we are achieving success on these factors.”
 - Asking critical success factors to take this form is not simple. People often cop out of the need to prioritize and sort through what they think has some relevance. That is, they make a long list of critical of key success factors that no one can remember, and few people can really observe or measure progress in.
 - IF these critical success factors are to be meaningful, they must be reduced to no more than 3 to 5 (things which can be listed on the fingers of one hand).
 - They must be written in such a way that any individual who is a member of one of the stakeholder groups can say, “Yes, I can see that this is a critical success factor.”
 - At the same time, these people should be able to say, “I know that we are making progress on this critical success factor because this, and this, and this, has happened and is moving us forward.”

10. Given these critical success factors, which of the actions needed to close the gap are the most important?

- Facilitators should guide the people to pick no more than 5 to 7 of these actions.
- This can be done in a number of ways.
 - Sticker voting – give each participant 5 to 7 “stick on dots” and let them mill around placing their dots on the actions as listed on flip charts on the walls;
 - Individual participant ranking of the actions that is then summarized into a group table;
 - Preparation of a matrix, which identifies each action as contributing in a high, low or medium way to each critical success factor, are all ways of doing this.
 - This option takes the most time and produces the most insight into differences in the group through dialogue.
- Each facilitator will have to make a judgment call on what is most appropriate given the group they are working with.

11. For each of the critical actions, what is the target date for first results, and what is target date for final results?

12. For each of these critical actions, who in the group is best suited to making sure that this action takes place?

13. When will this group get together again to monitor progress?

14. Are there any other things that must happen between now and the next meeting of this group to ensure that this plan moves forward?