Facilitation

What is Facilitation?

Facilitation is a way of providing leadership without taking control. The facilitator bridges ideas and perspectives in order to help a group work together effectively and assume responsibility for their own actions and decisions.

When Are We Facilitating?

As a facilitator you may be asked to design and lead a variety of interactions. Any interaction, formal or informal, can be seen as a “meeting” in need of a facilitator. Some examples include:

✓ A priority setting meeting
✓ A project debrief
✓ A problem solving or conflict resolution meeting
✓ A team building session

What Does An Effective Facilitator Do?

✓ Moves a group forward towards its objectives;
✓ Helps members assess their needs and create plans to meet them;
✓ Provides a process to help make high-quality decisions and use time effectively;
✓ Uses consensus to make all members feel included and as if their opinions are important;
✓ Helps the group communicate effectively by encouraging active listening and understanding;
✓ Teaches and empowers others to share responsibility;
✓ Fosters an environment where members enjoy working together and where they are working to attain common goals.
The Process

Setting the context: Context setting includes identifying broad outcomes, reviewing the agenda, creating guidelines and clarifying roles and responsibilities. The goal of context setting is to answer immediate questions about the big picture and basic details, to build a framework, clarify boundaries, and build a positive rapport to gain group ownership of the process and outcomes.

Opening: When opening you must present the topic at hand for consideration in a clear, concise way. This may be done through a variety of strategies; free-roaming conversation, brainstorming, list making, surveying, once-arounds, etc. In a debrief situation this is where the facilitator would begin seeking group themes by listening to group members discuss “what” happened.

Narrowing: Once a topic or theme has been introduced and considered by all, the facilitator is responsible for assisting the group in narrowing the subject matter. Techniques to assist with narrowing may include identifying limiting factors (time, resources, etc), polling, free flow prioritizing, identification of duplicates, voting, or consensus. In a debrief situation this is when the facilitator would begin to pull participants through the experiential learning cycle.

Closing: In order to effectively close a facilitator must take deliberate steps to “end” the facilitation session and create action to move forward. This includes ensuring that everyone has had the opportunity to express their opinions and be heard, affirming the group decisions and clarifying any questions, defining next steps, and identifying follow-up procedures. In a debrief situation this is when the facilitator would assist group member with “applying” the learning.
Learning Styles

Visual Learners:

These learners need to see the leader’s body language and facial expression to fully understand content. They tend to situate themselves near the speaker to avoid visual obstructions (e.g. people's heads). They may think in pictures and learn best from visual displays including maps, charts, and graphs.

Auditory Learners:

Individuals learn best through verbal lectures, discussions, talking things through and listening to what others have to say. Auditory learners interpret the underlying meanings of speech through listening to tone of voice, pitch, speed and other nuances. Some auditory learners also learn best by involving music and sound effects. Regulating voice tone, inflection, and body language will help auditory learners maintain interest and attention.

Kinesthetic Learners:

Individuals learn best through a hands-on approach, actively exploring the physical world around them. These learners must actually do in order to learn. They may find it hard to sit still for long periods and may become distracted by their need for activity and exploration. They learn best by touching, feeling, experiencing the material at hand. Kinesthetic learners are most successful when totally engaged with the learning activity.
**Active Listening:**

Active listening is listening with the intention of understanding. The goal of active listening is to improve mutual understanding.

**Do’s:**
- Make time to listen, be calm and patient
- Set the stage, ensure the environment is conducive to listening
- Demonstrate you’re listening with expressions, gestures, and body language
- Repeat and paraphrase as needed
- Ask questions
- Pay attention and “own” when you have become distracted

**Don’ts:**
- Don’t prepare your next comment
- Don’t judge until after you have heard and evaluated the entire content of the message
- Don’t try to identify with the person
- Don’t try to be a great problem solver by advising
- Don’t placate and simply tell the speaker what they want to hear
- Don’t railroad or get railroaded

**Asking the Right Questions**

**Open questions**
- These are useful in getting another person to speak.
- They often begin with the words: What, Why, When, Who
- Sometimes they are statements: “tell me about”, “give me examples of”.

**Closed questions**
- These are questions that require a yes or no answer and are useful for checking facts.
- They should be used with care - too many closed questions can cause frustration and shut down conversation

**Specific questions**
- These are also used to determine facts. For example “How much did you spend on that”

**Probing questions**
- These check for more detail or clarification, for example “tell me more…”
- Probing questions allow you to explore specific areas.
- Be careful because they can easily make people feel they are being interrogated.

**Hypothetical questions**
- These pose a theoretical situation in the future. For example, “what would you do if…?” These can be used to get others to think of new situations. They can also be used in interviews to find out how people might cope with new situations.

**Reflective questions**
- You can use these to reflect back what you think a speaker has said, to check understanding. You can also reflect the speaker’s feelings, which is useful in dealing with angry or difficult people and for defusing emotional situations.

**Leading questions**
- These are used to gain acceptance of your view – they are not useful in providing honest views and opinions. If you say to someone ‘you will be able to cope, won’t you?’ they may not like to disagree.
Tips for Facilitators

• **Active Listening Applies**: The principles of active listening transfer directly to the facilitator role. Facilitators must demonstrate listening, repeat/paraphrase, use questions effectively, be mindful of body language, etc.

• **Document**: It is not uncommon for a group member to not feel “heard” during a group session; this is due to the lack of one-on-one validation. Depending on the subject matter if may be a good idea to document group members thoughts/ideas/comments/concerns. This helps validate the listening process and lets participants know that you have heard them.

• **Small Groups (for those who don’t speak up)**: It is important to deliberately create space for all group members to dialogue. An effective means of doing this is to ask participants to work in pairs or small groups, which allows everyone to have a voice and keeps them from “opting out”. Once small groups have had an opportunity to discuss a subject, invite them to share their thoughts with the large group as a whole.

• **NSTUESO (for those who speak too often)**: In your facilitation experiences, you will encounter group members who seem to speak too often. Generally speaking these individuals are seeking validation, but there are strategies you can use to move the group forward. Try NUESTO (no one speaks twice until everyone has spoken once), use the once-around (moving clockwise asking everyone to respond when it is their turn) or try the phrase “let’s hear from someone else.”

• **Empathetic Listening**: When you sense your group members becoming emotional, pay close attention to what they are expressing. Use neutral phrases to validate their feelings, for example, if a group member seems angry don’t say “you’re obviously angry” rather, say “that must have been very frustrating for you” or “I can see how that might make someone angry”. Validate using empathetic listening in order to move the group forward, away from a potential negative emotional space.
Content:
Your job as a facilitator is to focus on the process you are leading and avoid the temptation of offering opinions about the topic being discussed. You should use questions and suggestions to move the process along, but you should never impose your opinion upon the group. The content of any meeting is what is being discussed. The content is where the energy of the participants should be directed. It is the verbal portion of the meeting and consumes the attention of the participants.

Emotion:
As the facilitator, it is essential that you do not become emotional about the topic the group is discussing or by the statements/actions of the participants. When emotional intensity in troubled groups becomes high enough, it produces illogical thoughts and communications, which may often cause destruction of relationships. When the facilitator stays emotionally neutral, members are able to think in a more logical, productive fashion in an environment where they do not feel threatened.

Body Language:
Maintaining neutral body language visually displays your openness and trustworthiness to the group. Neutral body language includes: maintaining eye contact and turning your body to the speaker, practicing active listening, keeping an open physical presence (arms and legs uncrossed, hands out of pockets), ensuring that all members can see you, etc.

Humor:
Neutral humor can also be seen as “positive humor”, a non-aggressive form of humor that does not make jokes at other’s expense or by using “put-downs”. Making jokes about others, no matter how intended, will inevitably result in loss of trust among ALL group members. Remember, when acting as a facilitator, the only person it is appropriate to make fun of is yourself!

Process: The One Thing You Are NOT Neutral About!
The process is the method, procedure, format, and tools used to achieve the goals of the meeting. The process includes the environment, the dynamics, and the style of interaction. The process is silent and often unnoticed by the participants. The process is the primary responsibility of the facilitator.

If you cannot be neutral...
- **Pose A Question:** Take your observation or idea and pose it to the group as a question.
- **Offer A Suggestion:** Ask the group if they would be willing to take a suggestion and then offer it. Do not demand or become authoritative.
- **Take Off Your Facilitators Hat:** If the situation demands that you take control due to safety risks, etc., verbally remove yourself from the facilitator role so members understand that you are no longer modeling.