

Facilitation ... more than a process

by
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About the author

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Have you ever been in the situation where you see a new facilitation technique (e.g. clustering) that gets really good results? Quickly you note down the methodology and the steps taken. However, when you use it, the results are much less dramatic. This is because we usually focus on the mechanics of the application and not the way it was facilitated.

When either facilitating or training facilitators, I focus on five key aspects (See Figure 1). Regardless of the application itself, these five aspects make a real difference in the overall quality of the results.

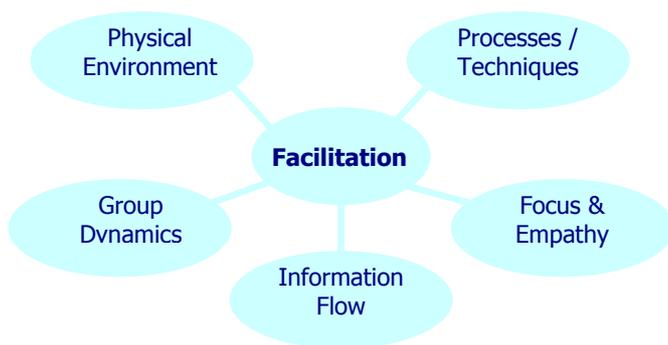


Figure 1: The five aspects of Facilitation

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Make it work for the group. Does it look like a room of action or just another meeting room?

You can improve rooms by putting up:

- Posters with key messages on them. Create them yourself.
- Copies of articles or documents relevant to the group, e.g. objectives, brochures.
- Appeal to different personalities by ensuring there is a lot of colour, words, pictures, and diagrams.
- Stick posters upside down, on the ceiling and around corners – Make people curious and they will absorb more of the content.

A tidy room creates a clean environment and leads to positive attitudes in the participants. Before a session, I make the effort to arrange the layout of the room and hide unwanted furniture. Then at each break I quickly tidy up empty cups and sweet papers.

I find that a 'U' shaped table layout restricts people and they tend to stay seated in one place. This layout also stifles break-out sessions because people tend to work just with those next to them. Getting people to move around keeps the blood flowing to the brain and also means they mix with the other participants. Therefore, I tend to arrange tables into little islands at the edge of the room. Then the group has enough space to be together in the centre with no physical barriers. When tables

are needed they can work at the table islands or in nearby areas. Finally, getting a group out of the room can keep them fresh and alert.

✚ Putting pens, paper, soft balls, etc on the tables gives the final touches in creating a flexible and dynamic working environment.

GROUP DYNAMICS

There are lots of theories on group dynamics and everyone has their favourites. You need to know enough to realise what's happening within the group and how to handle different situations. Therefore, you may want to read up on some of the theory or ask colleagues for advice on working in harmony with your company's culture.

Breakout groups are a great way to improve group dynamics. Quiet or shy people are happier to contribute in smaller groups whilst dominant people are tempered by having a smaller sphere of influence. In addition, small groups tend to cover ground faster so the overall session can progress more quickly so long as each break-out group shares their learning points.

✚ In the early stages, I normally choose who is in which breakout group. Once the team dynamics are working well, I let the group decide.

For new topics, split the group into pairs for 2-3 minute introductory discussions. This helps people to both structure their thoughts and test out a few ideas. Participants are then keener to listen to others and more willing to give their views.

In the larger group, keep the discussion flowing by obtaining contributions from people in a random order rather than a specific sequence. Letting people input when, and if they want to, also means that they are contributing only when they feel they have got something useful to say.

✚ If you would like everyone to contribute to a discussion, keep count on your fingers so that you know when everyone has spoken.

A good dose of **curiosity** is helpful. As a facilitator, I am curious about how other people see the world. It helps me to think: "What would I have to be feeling to act like that?" This allows me to avoid the emotion and focus calmly on the situation. It also puts me in an information gathering mindset so I start wondering or asking why things are happening instead of putting my own judgement on it. This helps to focus me firmly on the group's views rather than my own.

I keep in mind the following list of NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) presuppositions:

- A person is more than their behaviour.
- Everyone is doing the best they can with the resources they have.
- All behaviour has a good intention.
- Lack of co-operation is a sign of a lack of rapport.

These presuppositions really changed my perspective on people and enhanced my ability to facilitate.

INFORMATION FLOW

Good information flow can lead to substantial improvements in output and ownership and yet it is often neglected.

Flipcharts are very useful so long as everyone can see them and write on them. I stick completed charts on the walls so that they are visible all the time. It's a great advantage to use lower case letters because it makes the chart less stressful to read. Writing neatly usually takes practice but it is worthwhile. Children's 'Learning to write' booklets can be very helpful and cheap. It is also worth having your own set of pens because they will always work and you will have a wide variety of colours. See Table 1 for a few more tips.

 Get your own facilitation box or bag. Fill it with various pens, tape, sticky notes etc.

If information is presented on a **large scale** then; everyone can be involved in creating it, everyone can see it and so everyone will take ownership. You can buy large rolls of paper (1m x 20m) or just stick together 4-8 sheets of flipchart paper with tape. Then people can add information with sticky notes, or with spray glue and cards. Table 2 shows some potential uses of large sheets.

 If you are intending to write directly onto a sheet stuck on the wall then use at least 2 layers of paper. Otherwise the ink might mark the wall!

We use words so much in business, so I encourage people to use drawings. People are always keen to get out of their chairs and be active so they usually oblige. It also works because people get up close to what's going on and this involves them more, which creates more ownership. As the facilitator, I do not

Table 1: Flipchart Tips

- Alternate colours or bullets help with lists.
- Use people's words, not your version of them.
- Ask people to summarise long ideas.
- Keep lists in order: People get angry if you start to fill up gaps higher up.
- Write from the side so the flipchart is more visible.
- Red is often associated with danger therefore people tend to shy away from remembering things written in red pen.

Table 2: Uses for Large Sheets

A: Project Planning Creation. Create a time line on the large sheet. Let people write onto sticky notes their ideas of what needs to happen. Stick them all up. Go through and tidy it up.

B: Process Flows. Let everyone write down the process steps they can think of onto sticky notes. Get everyone to stick them all up in roughly the right sequence. Go through and tidy it up.

C: History or Success Maps. Create a timeline on the large sheet. Let everyone write and draw on it to show either where they have come from before a project or how the project has gone. Get people to put on events, high points, low points and their feelings.

get involved in actually drawing, so eventually all the walls end up being covered in output generated by the group for the group.

FOCUS & EMPATHY

The facilitator should be able to adapt to the moment and work effectively with the group. Here are just a few skills, apart from **curiosity**, which rise above the rest for me.

Focus on process:

All the participants are concentrating on the content. That means that you are probably the only person concerned about the process. So stay out of content and keep to process.

Before a session starts, I picture how each part of it will go and how it fits together. If I can get a smooth flow in my mind then I know the session will work. Figure 2 shows how I might plan a session in advance. Often, I use break-out group session time as an opportunity to reflect on how the overall session is going and what needs to happen next.

Blend with the group:

I use the term 'we' when communicating with the group. The participants then start to think in a 'we' way. This helps to pull the group itself together, as well as bringing me into the group.

Other questions to consider are:

- How will they be dressed? – How will I complement this?
- Are they energetic or thoughtful? – What am I?
- What is their language and terminology?

Ask questions:

Ask questions to increase the depth of a discussion. Examples might include:

Probing and clarifying

- "What does that mean for you?"

Figure 2: Session Sheet

Time	Duration	Topic	Description	Resources
9.00	30	Warm Up	In pairs create a Coat of Arms for this team. Stick around room. Go through each one.	Flipchart sheets Tape Pens
9.30	15	SAFE	S – State objective A – Go through agenda F – Find out who’s doing what, e.g. minutes. E – Explore how to make the meeting successful	Prepared objective. Prepared agenda. Flipchart, pens

- “What do you mean by that?”
- “That’s interesting. Can you explain it a little more?”

Precision questioning

- “Who are ‘they’?”
- “Does it ‘never’ happen?”

Know when to lead and when to follow:

- You lead every time you stand up at the front, or say what you want them to do.
- You follow when you sit amongst them, observe them, or when you ask questions.

Both are useful. Lead if the group is confused or newly formed and ‘finding its feet’. Follow when the group have momentum and energy and knows what it wants to do.

 We tend to lead too much. You will know if you do because the group will become less cooperative and you will start to feel tension between you and the group.

Be flexible:

In spite of excellent planning, sometimes a group issue comes up that needs to be resolved before the group goes any further. This is the time to forget about your agenda and refocus on the group’s new needs. Your value here is in being able to restructure the session so that the new issue can be explored and resolved efficiently. When it has been resolved, you can discuss with the group how to use the remaining time effectively because squashing the original agenda into less time doesn’t work.

PROCESSES

Preparation is everything. I try to speak to everyone involved in the session before it starts. This helps

me to understand individual styles and agendas. It also allows me to involve them in the design of the session so they are already fully committed to it.

I put a lot of passion into making sessions as participative and interesting as possible. Exercises might include; ‘cut and paste’ sessions, creating posters, break-out group discussions or even creating a team newspaper. Ask the participants to bring photocopies / pictures as supporting material. It’s better than just talking about topics! See Table 3 for some contrasting ways to achieve the same objective.

 When people have to choose between options, indicate a location in the room for each option and get people to move to that position to show their preference.

All you have to do is think broadly and creatively. Ask yourself: “How can they achieve this without my involvement?”

In Summary:

A person is not just the bones in their body. Likewise it’s the total package in facilitation that achieves the quality outcome. So next time when you see a new application of facilitation, feel the atmosphere, hear their words, and look further.

- How have they used the environment?
- How have they chosen to do the technique?
- How is the information generated and displayed?
- How have they fitted into the group?
- What are they thinking, seeing, feeling and what questions do they ask?

Table 3: Variations for: “What Strengths do I have?”

A: Go round group and allow people to talk about their strengths.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becomes hard as people lose attention due to sitting too long. • Tend to only worry about when their turn is and what they will say.
B: Share strengths in pairs. Randomly allow everyone to talk to the group about other person’s strengths.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Happier having discussed it already and talking about other person. • Random input so people can input when they want to. • Still quite inactive.
C: In pairs, draw head profile onto flipchart paper, discuss your strengths and write up onto sheet. Stick sheets around room. Randomly go through each sheet. Ask “ Is there any point you or someone else would like to expand upon / add to?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It’s visual and spoken so its more interesting. • Points can be read, so they don’t all have to be discussed. • Standing up and walking around keeps people alert. • They make the room belong to the group and they are displayed throughout the session.