

THE ROLE OF FACILITATOR

WHAT IS A FACILITATOR, AND WHY HAVE ONE?

The facilitator's job is to *support everyone to do their best thinking*. S/he encourages full participation; s/he promotes mutual understanding; s/he fosters inclusive solutions, and s/he cultivates shared responsibility.

How much value does this role have for a group? The answer depends on the group's goals.

Consider the "status update" meetings that consist solely of announcements and reports. Do the participants in those meetings need support to do their best thinking? Not really. And the same might be said of many *business-as-usual* monthly staff meetings, at which routine decisions are made about scheduling, task assignments and so on. Such issues could be handled for years without any facilitation whatsoever.

But what about more difficult challenges? For example, suppose a group's goal is to reduce violence on a high school campus. The participants are parents, teachers, administrators and a police officer. This group will quickly learn how difficult it is to make progress without facilitation. Despite a common goal, their frames of reference are very different. What seems to a parent like an obvious solution may seem simplistic to an administrator. What seems reasonable to an administrator may seem cowardly to a teacher. What seems responsible to a teacher may place too many demands on a parent. For such groups, it takes plenty of support to do their best thinking!

Groups face difficult challenges all the time. Long-term planning is hard to do well. So is restructuring or reengineering. This list goes on: resolving high-stakes conflicts; introducing new technology into a workplace; defining the scope of a project that hasn't been done before. In situations like these, a group is likely to make wiser, more lasting decisions if they enlist a facilitator who knows how to support them to do their best thinking.

Most individuals working in groups *do not know how* to solve tough problems on their own. They do not know how to build a shared framework of understanding – they seldom even recognize its significance. They dread conflict and discomfort, and they try hard to avoid it. Yet by avoiding the struggle to integrate one another's perspectives, the members of such groups greatly diminish their own potential to be effective. They *need* a facilitator.

THE ROLE OF FACILITATOR

FIRST
FUNCTION

THE FACILITATOR ENCOURAGES FULL PARTICIPATION

A Fundamental Problem: Self-Censorship

Inherent in group decision-making is a basic problem: *people don't say what they're really thinking*. It's hard to take risks, and particularly so when the response is likely to be hostile or dismissive. Consider these comments:

- "Haven't we already covered that point?"
- "Let's keep it simple, please."
- "Hurry up – we're running out of time."
- "What does *that* have to do with anything?"
- "Impossible. Won't work. No way."

Statements like these are oppressive. They discourage people from thinking out loud. The message is: if you want to speak, be simple. Be polished. Be able to say something smart or entertaining or keep your mouth shut.

We call these "*injunctions against thinking in public*." They run like an underground stream below the surface of a group's discussion, encouraging participants to edit their thinking before they speak. Who wants his or her ideas criticized before they are fully formed? Who wants to be told, "We've already answered that question"? Who wants to make an effort to express a complex thought while others in the room are doodling or whispering? This type of treatment leaves many people feeling embarrassed or inadequate.

To protect themselves, people censor themselves.

The Facilitator's Contribution

Helping a group to overcome these subtle but powerful norms is a basic part of the facilitator's job. Effective facilitators have the temperament and the skills to draw people out and help everyone feel heard. They know how to make it safe for people to ask the "stupid question" without feeling stupid. They know how to make room for quiet members. In sum, facilitators know how to build a respectful, supportive atmosphere that encourages people to keep thinking instead of shutting down.

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SECOND FUNCTION

THE FACILITATOR PROMOTES MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

A Fundamental Problem: Fixed Positions

A group cannot do its best thinking if the members don't understand one another. But most people find it difficult to detach from their fixed positions enough to actually listen to what others are saying. Instead, they get caught up in amplifying and defending their own perspectives.

Here's an example. A group of friends began exploring the possibility of forming a new business together. When the topic of money came up, biases emerged. One person wanted the profits divided equally. Another thought everyone should be paid on the basis of how much revenue they would generate. A third person believed the two visionaries should be paid more to make sure they would not leave. None of them were able to change their minds easily. Nor would it have been realistic to expect them to do so. Their opinions had been forming and developing for years.

And it gets worse! Each person's life experiences are so individual, so singular; everyone has remarkably different views of the world. What people expect, what they assume, how they use language, and how they behave – all these are likely sources of *mutual misunderstanding*. What's more, when people attempt to clear up a misunderstanding, they usually want their *own* ideas understood *first*. They may not say so directly, but their behavior indicates, "I can't really focus on what you are saying until I feel that you have understood *my* point of view." This easily becomes a vicious cycle. No wonder it's hard for people to let go of fixed positions!

The Facilitator's Contribution

A facilitator helps the group realize that sustainable agreements are built on a foundation of mutual understanding. S/he helps members see that thinking from each other's points of view is invaluable.

Moreover, the facilitator accepts the *inevitability of misunderstanding*. S/he recognizes that misunderstandings are stressful for everyone involved. The facilitator knows that people in distress need support; they need to be treated respectfully. S/he knows it is essential to stay impartial, honor all points of view and keep listening, so that each and every group member has confidence that *someone* understands them.

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THIRD FUNCTION

THE FACILITATOR FOSTERS INCLUSIVE SOLUTIONS

A Fundamental Problem: The Win/Lose Mentality

It's hard for most people to imagine that stakeholders with apparently irreconcilable differences might actually reach an agreement that benefits all parties. Most people are entrenched in a conventional mind-set: "It's either my way or your way." As a result, problem-solving discussions often degenerate into critiques, rationalizations, and sales jobs, as participants stay attached to their fixed positions and work to defend their own interests.

The Facilitator's Contribution

An experienced facilitator knows how to help a group search for innovative ideas that incorporate everyone's points of view. This can be a challenging task – the facilitator is often the only person in the room who has even considered the possibility that inclusive alternatives may exist.

To accomplish this goal, a facilitator draws from knowledge acquired by studying the theory and practice of collaborative problem solving. Thus s/he knows the steps it takes to build sustainable agreements:

- S/he knows how to help a group break free from restrictive business-as-usual discussions and engage in divergent thinking.
- S/he knows how to help a group survive the *Groan Zone* as its members struggle to build a shared framework of understanding.
- S/he knows how to help a group formulate creative, innovative ideas that reflect a weaving-together of several perspectives.
- S/he knows how to help a group complete its deliberations and arrive at a sound decision.

In short, the facilitator understands how to build sustainable agreements.

When a facilitator introduces a group to the values and methods that foster inclusive solutions, the impact is profound. Many people scoff at the very suggestion that a group can find meaningful solutions to difficult problems. As they discover the validity of this new way of thinking, they often become more hopeful about their group's potential effectiveness.

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FOURTH FUNCTION

THE FACILITATOR CULTIVATES SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

A Fundamental Problem: Reliance on Authority

In group settings, many people defer to the group's leaders and experts – often without giving their deferential behavior a second thought.

It's easy to understand why. Leaders wield power. They control resources. They have access to privileged information. They are networked with others who hold power. Likewise, experts have the training, the knowledge, the connections, and the familiarity with key issues.

Furthermore, remaining passive often seems to make such good sense! For one thing, speaking truth to power can have adverse consequences. For another thing, it may not be worth the bother if “nothing I can say would matter anyway.” And finally, if the expert knows more than the others, why not accept that person's judgment and follow his or her advice?

Yet, terms like *empowerment*, *collaboration* and *self-managing teams* reflect a growing consensus that over-reliance on authority can be ineffectual. “*People support what they help to create*,” is how Marvin Weisbord put it.* But even when a leader *wants* to empower a group, many people find it hard to break the pattern. In turn, that passivity induces leaders to “get on with it” and do the work themselves — a self-perpetuating cycle of dependency on authority.

The Facilitator's Contribution

Creating a culture of shared responsibility requires serious effort. The group's leader has to endorse the value of shared responsibility, and both the leader and the members have to develop the procedures and acquire the skills to make participatory decision-making work.

The existence of a facilitator often makes the crucial difference. S/he helps the group evolve from business-as-usual deference and dependency to assertiveness, collaboration, and shared responsibility. To help this happen, s/he is sometimes a coach, sometimes a teacher, sometimes a co-designer of systems and procedures, and sometimes a motivational speaker who inspires the group members to stand up and take risks. In this sense a facilitator is the steward of a profound culture change.

*M. Weisbord, *Productive Workplaces: Dignity, Meaning & Community in the 21st Century* (Pfeiffer, 2012).

FACILITATOR SKILLS FOR PARTICIPATORY DECISION MAKING

Encourage
Full Participation

Promote
Mutual Understanding

Foster
Inclusive Solutions

Cultivate
Shared Responsibility

*Stronger
Individuals*

*Stronger
Groups*

*Stronger
Agreements*

The facilitator's mission is to *support everyone to do their best thinking*.

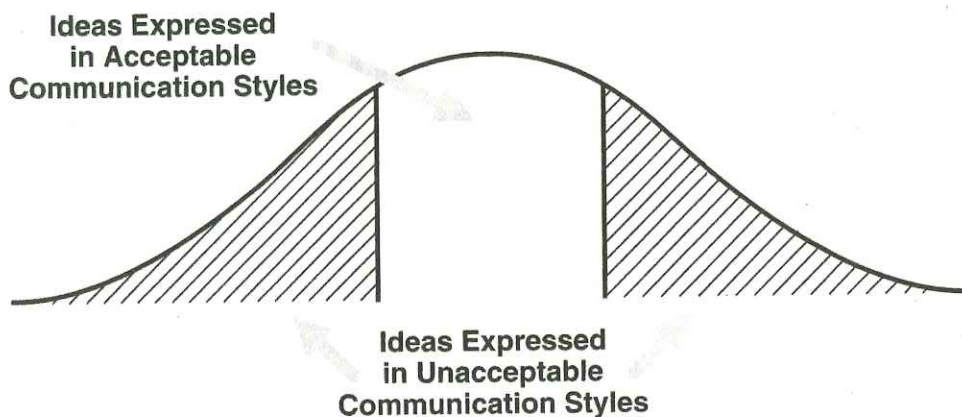
This mission is enacted by the facilitator's four functions:

- *Encourage full participation*
- *Promote mutual understanding*
- *Foster inclusive solutions*
- *Cultivate shared responsibility*

When a facilitator effectively performs these functions, the results are impressive. S/he strengthens the skills, awareness, and confidence of the individuals who work in that group; s/he strengthens the structure and capacity of the group as a whole; and s/he vastly increases the likelihood that the group will arrive at sustainable agreements.

THE CALCULUS OF DIVERSITY

THE LIMITS OF TOLERANCE



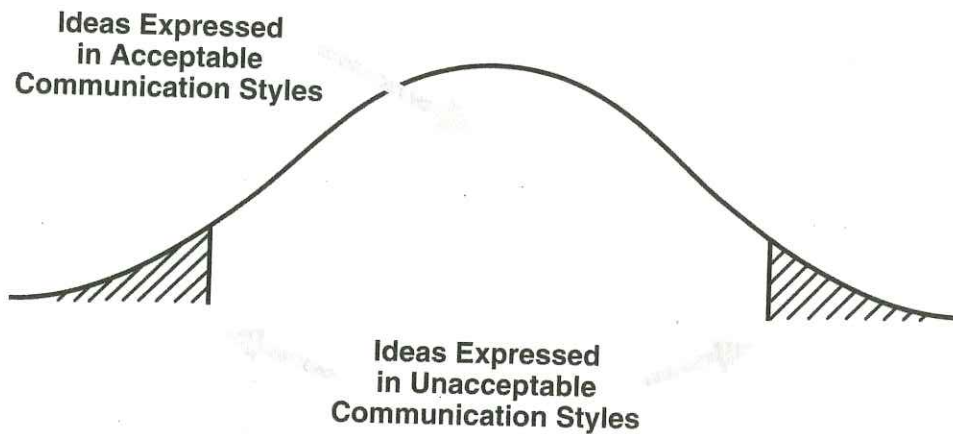
An idea that is expressed in an acceptable communication style will be taken more seriously by more people. Conversely, ideas that are presented poorly or offensively are harder for people to hear. For example:

- Many people become antsy when a speaker is repetitious.
- Group members can be impatient with shy or nervous members who speak haltingly.
- Others may not want to listen to exaggerations, distortions, or unfounded pronouncements.
- Some people become overwhelmed when a speaker goes on a tangent and raises a point that seems unrelated to the subject.
- And some people are profoundly uncomfortable with anyone who shows too much emotion.

In an ideal world, useful insights and ideas would be valued regardless of how they were expressed. But in the real world, when a speaker has an unpleasant communication style people just stop listening to the substance of the ideas being expressed – no matter how valuable those ideas might be.

THE CALCULUS OF DIVERSITY

STRETCHING
THE LIMITS



Groups that tolerate diverse communication styles can utilize more of the ideas put forth by its members than groups who need those ideas to be expressed in an "acceptable fashion." By using good listening skills, a facilitator can be an excellent support to such groups. For example:

- When someone is being repetitious, a facilitator can use paraphrasing to help that person summarize his or her thinking.
- When someone is speaking haltingly, in awkward, broken sentences, a facilitator can help the speaker relax by drawing him or her out with open-ended, nondirective questions.
- When someone is exaggerating or distorting, a facilitator can validate the central point without quarreling over its accuracy.
- When someone goes off on a tangent, a facilitator can treat the speaker with full respect by asking the person to help everyone see how his or her point connects with the broader context.
- When someone expresses himself or herself with intense feeling, a facilitator can first acknowledge the emotion, then paraphrase the content of the thought to ensure that the speaker's point does not get lost amid the group's gut reactions to the feelings.

These situations demonstrate how important it is for a facilitator to listen skillfully and respectfully to *everyone*.