

Role of the Facilitator

This is a pre-workshop sample for participants attending a custom-designed workshop, "Leading and Facilitating Great Meetings."

Bringing people together to solve problems, create a plan, make a decision, or obtain resources requires both a powerful and essential form of leadership. When people come together, even in the most sincere desire to cooperate, the collaboration we seek among diverse professionals does not always happen. We need facilitators who can orchestrate the group's extraordinary potential to accomplish what cannot be accomplished alone.

Leader...a person who has commanding authority or influence
Facilitate...to make easier or less difficult

Facilitation is both a science and an art: A facilitator applies a set of skills and methods along with sharp sensitivity to people to lead a group to peak performance. As with athletes, truly skilled facilitators make this form of leadership appear 'easy' so the group can focus its energy and creativity on a particular task, topic or project.

A facilitator is a guide and a catalyst to help the group do its work. A facilitator is a manager of group process – how the group works together, how they interact, make decisions and participate.

Generally, a facilitator is not

- An expert on the topic or the content of the work group.
- The leader, president, or senior person of the group
- A teacher, parent or preacher

The basic duties of a facilitator are to:

- Make sure everyone is working on the same problem with the same approach
- Ensure that everyone participates
- Protect participants from verbal abuse

Responsibilities:

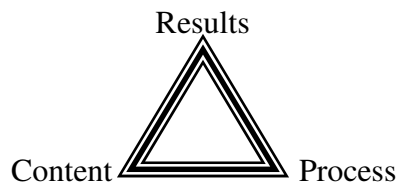
- Remain neutral on content
- Ensure balanced participation
- Tap the reservoir of group knowledge, experience and creativity
- Listen actively and ask others to do the same
- Encourage different points of view
- Record, organize and summarize input from the group
- Guide the group to make and implement decisions
- Achieve quality results

Facilitators do not control or dominate the discussion; they provide opportunities. To be effective you have to let go of the need for power or status. This is not the role to control, direct, impress, command nor influence the actions of others. It is best to leave your own agenda (ego) outside the door. This may be difficult for many professionals accustomed to taking charge, presenting and defending their own opinions and taking risks to accomplish objectives. The role of facilitating accomplishes objectives and involves taking risks too, but by listening, asking questions and helping. Your power comes from the position of suggesting and negotiating with the group - empowering them. And it must be with their consent.

Good facilitators have a keen awareness of power and power issues in a group. You will use processes and tools to help the group forget about power inequities (at least temporarily) and move forward as equals to influence the work of the group. This is one of your most important tasks.

Process versus Content

The results or outcomes of the successful group are based on a balance of 'what' is done with 'how' it gets done. Group *Process* is how the group works together – how they talk to each other, how they identify and solve problems, make decisions, and handle conflicts. In contrast, *Content* is what the group is working on – the topic, issue, or project. Many of us tend to focus on reaching the goal as quickly as possible. When Process, Content and Results are out of balance, the group does not achieve its optimal performance and can undermine the long-term relationships. A good facilitator is observant of the dynamics within the group and strives to maintain this balance.



The Facilitator's Role During the Meeting

Managing the process is the facilitator's key focus. Setting and maintaining the tone, energy and productivity of the group is key.

Provide Focus – ensure the objectives are results-oriented, that the group understands them and are visible in the room for all to see. Help the group leave the meeting with some tangible evidence of what it has accomplished – a decision made, plans developed, a list of ideas, priorities set, etc. Help the group leader identify realistic objectives for each meeting that are clear and workable. Frequently group leaders are so focused on the overall goal that it is difficult for them to narrow what can be accomplished at one meeting.

Provide structure. Yet be aware of when to be flexible so the structure doesn't get in the way. Your goal is to balance the session for maximum productivity with informality and fun. If the session is too structured and tense, people will push through it, but not necessarily do their best thinking.

Organize the session so there is a beginning, middle and an end. The beginning of the meeting is crucial to its success as this is when people's attention is caught and when you focus the group. The beginning actually starts well before the actual meeting in the design and planning of the agenda, invitees, room set-up, and other logistics.

The middle of meeting structure is when the real work gets done. The facilitator assists in managing time, keeping discussion/presentations flowing, and varying the activity, pace and intensity of the work. Facilitators or recorders capture ideas throughout the meeting on charts so all can see them. As people see their ideas, thoughts, they can see their progress. The facilitator assists in eliciting ideas and concerns, prioritizing and problem-solving.

The way the session ends may make the difference in where anything is accomplished at all. Plan the end ahead. Be clear about what needs to happen at the end of the session and plan enough time to end the meeting well. This includes a review of the decisions that were made, action items assigned to individuals with due dates, items for the next meeting agenda as well as a quick 'temperature check' on how the team is performing and suggestions for improvement.

The role of a good facilitator is a humbling one because credit goes to the group while you remain in the background. As long as the group is productive, you are doing your job.

"Of the best leader, when the job is done the people say 'we did it ourselves.' "

-Lao Tzu in the Tao Te Ching