Chapter One
Understanding Facilitation

If you look up the word facilitator in the dictionary, you'll see it described as someone who helps a group of people understand their common objectives and assists them to achieve these objectives without taking a particular position in the discussion.

This role basically did not exist until the middle of the last century, when theorists in the emerging field of behavioral science identified the need for a leadership style that contributed structure to complex group interactions instead of direction and answers.

The work of these behavioral pioneers led to the emergence of a new and important role in which the person who manages the meeting no longer participates in the discussion or tries to influence the outcome. Instead, he or she stays out of all conversations in order to focus on how the meeting is being run. Instead of offering opinions, this person provides participants with structure and tools. Instead of promoting a point of view, he or she manages participation to ensure that everyone is heard. Instead of making decisions and giving orders, he or she supports the participants in identifying their own goals and developing their own action plans.

The goal of facilitation is enhanced group effectiveness.

What Is Facilitation?

Facilitation is a leadership role in which the decision-making power resides in the members. This frees the facilitator to focus on creating a climate of collaboration and provide the group with the structure it needs to be effective.

Instead of offering solutions, facilitators offer group members tools they can use to develop their own answers. Facilitators attend meetings to guide members through their discussions, step-by-step, encouraging them to reach their own conclusions.

A meeting without a facilitator is about as effective as a sports team trying to play a game without a referee.

Rather than being a player, facilitators act more like referees. They watch the action, more than participate in it. They help members define their goals. They ensure that group members have effective rules to guide interaction. They provide an orderly sequence of activities. They keep their fingers on the pulse and know when to move on or wrap things up. They keep discussion focused and help group members achieve closure. They do all of this while remaining neutral about the topics under discussion so as not to interfere with the decision-making authority of the group.

What Does a Facilitator Do?

Facilitation is a helping role.

Facilitators make their contribution by:

- conducting background research to understand the needs of the group and what they hope to achieve
- helping the group define its overall goal, as well as its specific objectives
- preparing a detailed agenda that includes process notes describing how the interaction will unfold
- helping the group create rules of conduct that create an effective climate
- making sure that assumptions are surfaced and tested
- questioning and probing to encourage deeper exploration
- offering the right tools and techniques at the right moment
- encouraging participation by everyone
- guiding group discussion to keep it on track
- making accurate notes that reflect the ideas of members
- helping members constructively manage differences of opinion
- redirecting ineffective behaviors
- providing feedback to the group, so that they can assess their progress and make adjustments
- helping the group to achieve closure and identify next steps
- helping the group access resources from inside and outside the group
- providing a means for evaluation the meeting and seeking improvements

Facilitators bring structure to interactions to make them productive. They plan carefully and then adapt as things unfold. For more on how facilitators organize and manage their work, refer to Chapter Three on the stages of the facilitation process.

What Do Facilitators Believe?

Facilitators operate by a core set of principles. At the heart of these is the belief that two heads are better than one and that, to do a good job, people need to be fully engaged and empowered.

Facilitators believe that two heads are better than one.

All facilitators firmly believe that:

- people are intelligent, capable, and want to do the right thing
- groups can make better decisions than any one person can make alone
- everyone's opinion is of equal value, regardless of rank or position
- people are more committed to the ideas and plans that they have helped to create
- participants can be trusted to assume accountability for their decisions
- groups can manage their own conflicts, behaviors, and relationships if they are given the right tools and training
- the *process*, if well designed and honestly applied, can be trusted to achieve results

In contrast to the traditional model of leadership, in which the leader is viewed as the most important person in the room, the facilitator puts the members first. Members decide the goals, make the decisions, implement action plans, and hold themselves accountable for achieving results. The facilitator's contribution is to provide structure and offer the right tools at the right time.

Facilitating is ultimately about shifting responsibility from the leader to the members, from management to employees. By playing the process role, facilitators encourage group members to take charge.

What Are Typical Facilitator Assignments?

Neutral, third-party facilitators are asked to design and lead a wide variety of meetings:

- strategic planning retreats
- team-building events
- sessions to clarify objectives and create detailed results indicators
- priority-setting meetings
- regular staff meetings
- program review/evaluation sessions
- communications/liaison meetings
- meetings to negotiate team roles and responsibilities
- problem-solving/process improvement sessions
- meetings to share feedback and recommend improvements
- focus groups for gathering input on a new program or product

Differentiating Between Process and Content

A facilitator's job is to manage the process and leave the content to the participants.

The two words you'll hear over and over again in facilitation are process and content. These are the two dimensions of any interaction between people.

The *content* of any meeting is *what* is being discussed: the task at hand, the subjects being dealt with and the problems being solved. The *content* is expressed in the agenda and the words that are spoken. Because it's the verbal portion of the meeting, the content is obvious and typically consumes the attention of the members.

Process deals with *how* things are being discussed: the methods, procedures, format, and tools used. The *process* also includes the style of the interaction, the group dynamics, and the climate that's established. Because the *process* is silent, it's harder to pinpoint. It's the aspect of most meetings that's largely unseen and often ignored, while people are focused on the *content*.

When the person leading the meeting offers an opinion with the intent of influencing the outcome of discussions, he or she is acting as the "content leader." When a facilitator offers tools and focuses on managing member interaction, he or she is acting as the "process leader."

CONTENT	PROCESS
What	**How**
The task	The methods
The subjects for discussion	How relations are maintained
The problems being solved	The tools being used
The decisions made	The rules or norms set
The agenda items	The group dynamics
The goals	The climate

It is important to note that, while facilitators are totally unassertive about the content under discussion, they are very assertive in the way they manage the process elements. This assertiveness is needed to deal with conflict, make interventions, and help the group when it gets stuck.

At first glance, facilitation may seem like a rather vague set of "warm and fuzzy," people-oriented stuff. But as you'll learn, it's actually a highly structured and assertive set of practices with a rich set of tools and techniques. Once you understand these techniques and learn how to apply them, you'll immediately see substantial improvement in the overall performance of any group.

Facilitation Tools

As a facilitator you'll have an extensive set of tools at your disposal. These tools fall into two categories: the *Core Practices* and the *Process Tools*.

The *Core Practices,* which are rooted in the manner, style, and behavior of the facilitator, include:

- Staying Neutral
- Listening Actively
- Asking Questions
- Paraphrasing Continuously
- Summarizing Discussions
- Recording Ideas
- Synthesizing Ideas
- Keeping on Track
- Testing Assumptions
- Managing the Climate

Facilitation has a rich set of tools and techniques.

The *Process Tools,* which are structured activities that provide a clear sequence of steps, include:

- Visioning
- Force-Field Analysis
- Brainstorming
- Priority Setting
- Surveys
- Root-Cause Analysis
- Gap Analysis
- Decision Grids
- Systematic Problem Solving

Understanding each of these tools and how to use them is a vital part of any facilitator's job.

Core Practices Overview

Regardless of the type of meeting they're managing or the specific process tool being used, facilitators make constant use of the following core practices. Of these, the first five are foundational. These are in constant use during facilitation, regardless of what other tool are also deployed.

The core practices are the foundation of the facilitator's style.

1. Facilitators stay neutral on the content. Staying neutral on the content of discussions is the hallmark of the facilitator role. Facilitators are neutral outsiders who have no stake in the outcome of discussions. They are there only to provide structure and create a climate of collaboration. When facilitators ask questions or make helpful suggestions, they never do this to impose their views or impact decisions.

2. They listen actively. This is listening to understand more than judge. It also means using attentive body language and looking participants in the eye while they're speaking. Eye contact can also be used to acknowledge points and prompt quiet people to take part.

3. They ask questions. Questioning is the most fundamental facilitator tool. Questions can be used to test assumptions, probe for hidden information, challenge assumptions, and ratify for consensus. Effective questioning encourages people to look past symptoms to get at root causes.

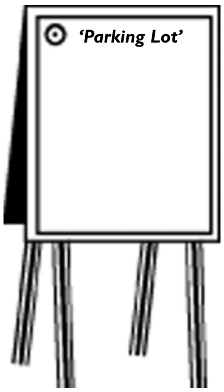
4. They paraphrase continuously. Facilitators paraphrase continuously during discussions. Paraphrasing involves repeating what group members say. This lets people know they are heard and acknowledges their input. Paraphrasing also lets others hear points for a second time and provides an opportunity to clarify ideas.

5. They summarize discussions. Facilitators summarize ideas shared by members at the end of every discussion. They do this to ensure that everyone heard all of the ideas that were put forth, to check for accuracy, and to bring closure. Facilitators also summarize in the midst of discussions to catch everyone up on the conversation and refresh the topic during conversation lulls. Summarizing is also useful to restart a stalled discussion, since it reminds group members of the points already made and often sparks new thinking. In many decision-making discussions, consensus is created when the facilitator gives the group a clear and concise summarization of key points.

In addition to the five techniques described above, there are several additional facilitator techniques that make up the core practices.

Facilitators record ideas. Groups need to leave meetings with complete and accurate notes that summarize discussions. Facilitators quickly and accurately record what's being said. Whether they are using a flip chart or electronic whiteboard, they are careful to use the key words that people suggest and organize the notes into related groupings. There is more on recording group ideas later in this chapter.

They synthesize ideas. Facilitators ping-pong ideas around the group to ensure that people build on each other's ideas. In non-decision-making conversations they do this to build conversation and create synergy. In decision-making conversations they ping-pong ideas to allow each person to add his or her comments to the points made by others until they have synthesized a statement everyone can live with.



They keep discussions on track. When discussions veer off track or when people lose focus, facilitators notice this and tactfully point it out. They place a Parking Lot sheet on a wall and offer participants the option of placing extraneous topics on it for later discussion.

They test assumptions. Facilitators outline the parameters, empowerment levels, and other constraints that apply so that they are understood by all. They are always on the lookout for situations in which misunderstanding are rooted in differing assumptions and probe carefully to uncover these.

They manage the group climate. Facilitators help members set behavioral norms or group guidelines. Then they intervene tactfully when they notice that members are not adhering to their own rules. (See later chapters for more on both norms and making interventions.)

They make periodic process checks. This involves tactfully stopping the action whenever group effectiveness declines. Facilitators can intervene to check whether the purpose is still clear to everyone, the process is working, and the pace is effective or to find out how people are feeling.

They give and receive feedback. Facilitators always have their fingers on the pulse of the group and offer their perspective to help the group make adjustments. They are also receptive to input and invite members to point out anything that needs adjustment. At the end of each meeting, facilitators create mechanisms such as written evaluations or exit surveys to capture feedback for ongoing improvement.

What Does Neutral Mean?

Facilitation was created to be a neutral role played by an unbiased outsider. The role of this neutral third party is solely to support group decision making without exerting influence over the outcome. Facilitators, therefore, always focus on process and stay out of the content.

One of the most difficult things about learning to facilitate is staying within the neutrality boundary because facilitators often have insight into the subject under discussion. The issue of neutrality is further complicated by the fact that a lot of facilitation isn't done by disinterested outsiders, but by someone from within the group who has a real stake in the outcome.

This question of whether or not leaders can facilitate their own teams is so significant that an entire chapter of this book has been devoted to exploring this issue. For now, the discussion of neutrality will focus on the assumption that the facilitator is indeed a third-party outsider.

It's important to note that staying neutral is a challenge, even for neutral outsiders! Sometimes group members say things that are obviously incorrect or they miss important facts. In these instances it's very difficult for the facilitator to hold back and maintain body language that hides a bias.

Regardless of the situation, it's important to understand that neutrality can still be maintained by applying specific techniques.

1st Strategy—Ask Questions

Even though the role is dispassionate, it's important to realize that facilitators don't want to enable bad decision making! If the facilitator has an idea that might help the group, he or she should not withhold it.

If the facilitator thinks that the group is overlooking an idea, the facilitator can introduce that idea as a question that sparks thought. For example, if the group is spinning its wheels because they can't afford new computers, the facilitator can ask: *"What are the benefits of renting new computers as an interim strategy?"*

Through questioning, group members are being prompted to consider another option, but are not being told whether to accept or reject it. The facilitator's neutrality is maintained because he or she hasn't told the group what to do and decision-making control remains with the members.

Neither asking questions nor offering suggestions oversteps the boundaries of neutrality.

2nd Strategy—Offer Suggestions

If the facilitator has a good content idea that the group should consider, it's within the bounds of the neutral role to offer the group a suggestion for their consideration. He or she might say: *"I suggest that you consider researching the pros and cons of renting computers."* Although this sounds like the facilitator has strayed into content, it's still facilitative if the content sounds like an offering, not an order. As with questioning, making suggestions doesn't violate neutrality as long as group members retain the power to decide.

External parties can more easily remain neutral than leaders or peers.

3rd Strategy—Take Off the Facilitator's Hat

If the group is about to make a serious mistake and all of the questioning and suggesting in the world has not worked to move them in the right direction, facilitators sometimes step out of their neutral role to share information that will move the group to a higher quality decision.

In these rare cases, it's important for the facilitator to clearly indicate that he or she is stepping out of the role and explain that he or she is now playing a content role. The facilitator might say: *"I need to step out of the role of facilitator for a minute and tell you that the office location you're considering is not close to any of the rapid transit corridors planned for the next twenty years."*

Since leaping in and out of the facilitator role causes confusion and distrust, taking off the neutral hat should be done very selectively. This role shift is justified when the facilitator is convinced that the group is in danger of making a major mistake and he or she has information or advice that will save the day.

Leaping in and out of the neutral role sends the message to participants that the facilitator is not to be trusted in the neutral role and that their ideas may be overturned at any time.

There's also a huge difference between a neutral, external party asking a question or making a suggestion and a leader who's facilitating doing these things. When an outsider asks questions or offers a suggestion, members feel helped in their decision-making process. When their leader does the same thing, members likely hear an order. Therefore, staying neutral while questioning and suggesting should take into account the power relationship between the players.

Learn to Say *"Okay"*

Learn to say "okay" instead of "good."

When a group member says something that seems like an excellent point, facilitators can be tempted to congratulate that person by saying *"Good point."* or *"Great idea."* Unfortunately, this is a sure way to lose your neutrality, since it makes it appear that you're straying into the content and trying to influence the group's opinion. To avoid this common pitfall, substitute the word *"Okay"* for *"Good point." "Okay"* allows you to acknowledge that you heard the point, but does not indicate any approval on your part.

Whenever you're tempted to say *"I like that idea,"* substitute *"Do the rest of you like that idea?"* After all, you're not there to judge member suggestions, but to help them do that.

When to Say *"We"*

Another of the dilemmas related to neutrality concerns whether or not to say *"We"* and include oneself in the conversation. Here is the simple rule:

Include yourself and say *"We"* when referring to the process:

Use "We" when referring to the process and "You" when reviewing the content.

> *"How are we doing on time?"*
> *"Does this approach we're taking seem to be working?"*
> *"Do we need a break?"*

Use *"You"* when referring to the content:

> *"Let me read back what you've said so far."*
> *"Here are the issues in the order you ranked them."*
> *"Are you satisfied that this has been discussed enough?"*

Saying *"We"* about the content gives the impression that you also own the ideas being generated, while saying *"You"* reinforces their ownership of the meeting and the ideas that emerge from it.

How Assertive Can a Facilitator Be?

Consider this scenario. You're facilitating a meeting in which a key decision has to be made; however, two of the members get embroiled in a conflict. They take turns interrupting one another. Neither one is listening or acknowledging the other. Tempers rise. As the conflict escalates, you stand by helplessly saying nothing, in the mistaken belief that staying neutral means staying totally removed.

This scenario addresses a common misconception that taking a neutral stance on the content of meetings means being passive. This is far from the case. In fact, if you operate on the belief that your role is basically unassertive, you'll be in danger of ending up as nothing more than a note taker or scribe, while conflicts rage around you.

While it's true that facilitators should be non-directive on the topic being discussed, they have to be assertive on the process aspects of any meeting. It's within the parameters of the facilitator role to decide all aspects of the meeting process, including informing members how agenda items will be handled, which discussion tools will be used, who will speak in which order, and so on.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that being neutral on the content also means being neutral about the process!

This doesn't mean that you shouldn't collaborate with members on the session design. Gaining member input is always a good idea since it enhances buy-in. It does mean that process is the special expertise of the facilitator. In matters of process, it's appropriate for you to have the final say.

Just how appropriate and necessary a high level of assertiveness is can be best understood when a group becomes dysfunctional. In these situations, facilitators need to be firm and act like referees, stepping into the fray to restore order to the proceedings.

A high level of assertiveness on process is especially critical whenever there are personal attacks or other rude behavior. All facilitators are empowered to interrupt and redirect individuals so that their interactions become more appropriate. In the section on facilitating conflict, you'll find more on techniques and language you can use for making interventions and managing stormy meetings. By following these practices, you'll be behaving in a way that's anything but passive.

Some assertive actions facilitators take, when the situation warrants it, include:

- insisting on meeting norms
- calling on quiet people
- stopping to check on the process
- calling time-outs and breaks
- intervening to stop rude behavior
- asking probing questions
- challenging assumptions
- adjusting the meeting design
- summarizing discussions
- insisting on closure
- insisting on action plans
- implementing evaluation activities

Mastering the language of facilitation will help you avoid sounding critical or judgmental.

The Language of Facililtation

A specific style of language has evolved that lets facilitators manage interactions without sounding critical or judgmental. The main language techniques are:

- paraphrasing
- reporting behavior
- describing feelings
- perception checking

Paraphrasing involves describing, in your own words, what another person's remarks convey.

> *"Do I understand you correctly that . . ."*
> *"Are you saying . . ."*
> *"What I'm hearing you say is . . ."*

Facilitators paraphrase continuously, especially if the discussion starts to spin in circles or if the conversation becomes heated. This repetition assures participants that their ideas are being heard.

Reporting behavior consists of stating the specific, observable actions of others without making accusations or generalizations about them as people, or attributing motives to them.

> *"I'm noticing that we've only heard from three people throughout most of this discussion."*
> *"I'm noticing that several people are looking through their journals and writing."*

By describing specific behaviors, facilitators give participants information about how their actions are being perceived. Feeding this information back in a non-threatening manner opens the door to improve the existing situation.

New facilitators often make the mistake of not paraphrasing enough.

Descriptions of feelings consist of specifying or identifying feelings by naming the feeling with a metaphor or a figure of speech.

> *"I feel we've run out of energy."* (naming)
> *"I feel as if we're facing a brick wall."* (metaphor)
> *"I feel like a fly on the wall."* (figure of speech)

Facilitators always need to be honest with group members by saying things like: *"I feel exhausted right now"* or *"I feel frustrated."* This lets other people know that it's okay for them to express feelings.

Perception checking is describing another person's inner state in order to check whether that perception is correct.

> *"You appear upset by the last comment that was made. Are you?"*
> *"You seem impatient. Are you anxious to move on to the next topic?"*

Perception checking is a very important tool. It lets the facilitator take the pulse of participants who might be experiencing emotions that get in the way of their participation.

Conversation Structures

One of the most important mental models in facilitation is that conversations fall into two distinct categories: they are either decision making in nature or not. Each type of conversation has distinct features that dictate the techniques used to manage it. Facilitators who understand these two distinct conversation structures can use them to structure and manage discussions.

Non-Decision-Making Conversations

Non-decision-making conversations are those in which group members simply share ideas or information. Examples of non-decision-making conversations include:

- a brainstorming session in which ideas are generated but not judged
- an information sharing session in which group members describe their experiences or update each other
- a discussion aimed at making a list of individual preferences or key factors in a situation

During non-decision-making discussions, members state ideas, but there is no element of judging or ranking the ideas. The facilitator simply records ideas as they are presented without the need to check with others to test their views.

Decision-Making Conversations

Decision-making conversations are those discussions in which group member ideas are combined to arrive at either an action plan or a rule that all members must feel they can implement or accept.

Facilitators need to manage decision-making conversations differently because they need to help members arrive at a shared agreement. This involves clarifying ideas, ping-ponging ideas around so others can add their thoughts, making summary statements that summarize the discussion, and recording the group opinion.

In non-decision-making conversations facilitators record what individuals think. In decision-making conversations they record what the group thinks. In summary:

Non-Decision-Making	**Decision-Making**
Conversations in which no action plans or norms are identified or ratified	Discussions in which action plans or norms are identified and ratified
Information sharing	Interactive discussions where members arrive at a decision
Brainstorming	List making
One-way dialogue	Interactive dialogue
Facilitator records individual ideas	Facilitator records group opinion

Always know whether you are facilitating a decision-making conversation or one in which no decisions are being made.

Starting a Facilitation

Anyone who attends meetings knows that things can easily go off track or be stalled if there's the slightest confusion about the goal, how the discussion will be managed, or the empowerment level of the group. That's why facilitators always ensure that there's clarity regarding the scope of the conversation before they allow people to start discussing agenda items. They create this clarity by using a Start Sequence.

Facilitators clarify the scope of every conversation by ensuring that there's a Start Sequence in place.

Start sequences have three components:

1. The Purpose—a statement that clearly describes the goal of the facilitated discussion. This is what will be discussed. This can take the form of a simple goal statement or it can be more detailed and include a description of the desired outcomes.

2. The Process—a statement of how the session will be conducted. This helps the participants understand how decisions will be made, the speaking order, and any structuring tools that will be used. The process description should also clarify whether members are making the final decision or are simply being asked for input about a decision to be made elsewhere.

3. The Timeframe—a statement of how long the entire discussion will take. In more complex conversations, timeframes should also be provided for segments within the overall discussion.

Start Sequence Variations

Start sequences can be simple or they can be more complex. They can be created ahead of time by getting input from group members, then feeding that input back at the beginning of a discussion. In other situations the start sequence is created at the start of a discussion. In these instances the facilitator can invite group members to make a statement about the purpose of the session and then test that statement with everyone to ensure a shared understanding.

While group member input is almost always sought to define the purpose, facilitators usually provide the process. This is because group members typically don't have enough experience with process design to propose an approach. Describing the process is important because it helps the participants understand how the topic will be managed.

Clearly defining the timeframe for a specific discussion is always a good idea. One of the biggest problems in meetings is that they can drag on. By engaging members in a discussion about time, the facilitator can help members set boundaries. Once members have agreed to timeframes, it's also easier for the facilitator to intervene if agreed to timeframes are being violated.

While it isn't always necessary, it is a good practice to write the details of the start sequence on a flip chart and post this in clear sight. This helps to minimize confusion as the discussion unfolds.

Start Sequence Examples

A Simple Start Sequence

Purpose: To make recommendations to the committee empowered to renovate staff common areas.
Process: Brainstorming of ideas by the large group. Multi-voting to rank the ideas.
Time: 25 minutes.

A Complex Start Sequence

Purpose: To discuss the recent new product launch campaign in order to identify the lessons learned. To leave with a clear list of the things that we did well, the things that we did not execute well, and specific strategies for overcoming the things that we did not execute effectively to improve our next launch.
Process: (1) In a large group, identify all of the things that went well and the contributing factors at every step of the launch. Tell success stories to celebrate the positives and isolate what made each element work.
(2) Individually write all the things that did not go well at each launch stage on index cards. Post these on the walls. (3) Hold a plenary to read all the posted issues aloud. (4) Use multi-voting to rank the execution issues. (5) Break into small groups to apply the steps of systematic problem solving to the four top-ranked items. (6) Hold a plenary to hear the top-ranked recommendations for action from each team and ratify these in the large group.
Timeframe: (1) 35 min, (2) 40 min, (3) 30 min, (4) 30 min (with break), (5) 60 min, (6) 45 min. Total = 240 minutes or 4 hours.

Learn to differentiate between simple and complex start sequences.

During a Facilitation

Once a discussion is underway, it can easily get side-tracked or stuck, even when there's a clear start sequence in place. This can happen for any number of reasons, including that:

- the topic may be more complex than anticipated
- the conversation may have drifted onto another topic
- the process tool being used may not be the right one for the discussion
- the original timeframes may not have been realistic
- individuals may be feeling tired or lose focus

Sometimes there are obvious signs that these things have happened, but there are also lots of times when there are no outward signs that meeting effectiveness is declining. That's why it's vitally important that facilitators periodically stop the action and conduct what is known as a process check.

Process checking is a type of intervention designed to test effectiveness even when there are no outward signs of problems. As with all interventions, the sole purpose of process checking is to restore the effectiveness of the group.

A useful metaphor for process checking is a stop sign. That's because conducting a process check involves stopping the action to shift member focus to the process or how things are going.

Process Checking Structure

Make it a routine to conduct process checks, even when there are no signs of problems.

There are four basic areas of inquiry in process checking. Facilitators can check just one element, two, three, or all four.

1. *Progress:* Ask the members if they think the goal of the meeting is being achieved. Do they think that the purpose is still clear. Do they think that the discussion is still on topic. Do they feel that they're making progress.

   When to check for progress: If few ideas are emerging, when the conversation goes in circles, at periodic intervals, or at points of closure.

2. *Process:* Ask members whether they feel that the tool or approach being used is working. Ask whether any progress is being made using this approach. Ask how much longer they're willing to keep using that approach. Offer other tools.

   When to check the process: When the tool being used isn't yielding results, when it's evident that the designated process isn't being followed, or at periodic intervals.

3. *Pace:* Ask members if things are moving at the right pace.

   When to check the pace: When timelines are not being met or at periodic intervals.

4. *People:* Ask people how they are feeling. Ask whether anyone has lost the thread of the conversation.

   When to check the people: When the meeting has been going on for a while, when people grow silent and withdraw, or when people look tired or frustrated.

Why Process Checks Are Important

Process checks are like an early warning system that lets the facilitator detect problems while there's still time to take corrective action. This avoids the pitfall of finding out at the end of a meeting that things had been off track since the early stages.

Ending a Facilitation

One of the biggest meeting pitfalls is ending without real closure or detailed next steps. When members leave a meeting without action plans, the entire meeting can feel like a waste of time.

Whether ending a short discussion or an extended meeting, facilitators always provide a summary of key points to ensure that there's a shared view of the outcome.

Even if the session was a non-decision-making session, facilitators should provide a concise summary of what was discussed.

It's essential to bring proper closure to all discussions.

Ending a Non-Decision-Making Session

At the end of a discussion during which people shared information, brainstormed ideas, or made lists, it is a facilitator best practice to provide a summary of the points discussed. This allows people to add any points that were missed and it brings closure.

Ending a Decision-Making Session

At the end of a session during which group members made one or more decisions, the facilitator needs to not only recap what was decided, but also ratify the outcome and ensure that clear action steps are in place. This can include:

- reviewing the details of the decision(s)
- checking the decision(s) for clarity and completeness
- ratifying the decision by asking each member whether he or she can live with the outcome to reduce the risks of post-meeting loss of commitment
- identification of next steps and creation of detailed action plans
- troubleshooting the action plan by asking and answering questions like:

"What sudden shifts could change priorities or block implementation?"

In addition to helping group members summarize and plan for action, facilitators also do some or all of the following to end a facilitation:

- round up Parking Lot items and help members identify how to deal with them in the future
- help members create the agenda for their next meeting
- decide on a means of follow-up: either written reports, emails, or personal report-back session
- help members decide who will transcribe the flip-chart sheets
- allow group members to take digital snapshots of flip charts if they have an immediate need for notes
- help members evaluate the session
- thank group members for the privilege of facilitating

For more on ending a facilitated session, refer to page 57.

It's essential to record member ideas so everyone can see the progress being made.

Effective Note Taking

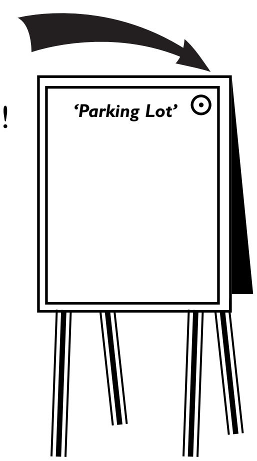
Facilitation has always been very closely linked with those awkward three-legged easels that are the trademark of the profession. Flip charts were invented by the first facilitators, who were looking for a way to enable group members to see what was being said during discussions.

Today, flip charts are quickly being eclipsed by all manner of electronic boards and sticky wall coverings. While this trend is likely to continue, don't be surprised if those gawky flip-chart stands stick around as well.

Writing on a flip chart or electronic board requires slightly larger handwriting than normal so people can see the words across the room. Writing while also asking questions, listening to new comments, and monitoring group body language can be quite a challenge. Don't be surprised if your handwriting suddenly looks like kindergarten scrawl and even familiar spelling is impossible to recall.

Since very few people are able to create flawless flip charts, it's best to relax about spelling and penmanship as long as the main ideas are captured so that the main ideas are clear. This relaxed attitude is especially important when encouraging group members to try their hand at facilitating. Just point out that every piece of flip-chart paper has an imaginary spell-check button that automatically corrects all mistakes.

Install an imaginary spell check button on each piece of flip-chart paper. Ask people to accept that hitting the button corrects all mistakes!



The Rules of Wording

Since facilitators always strive to be neutral to ensure that group members control outcomes, it's important to accurately record what people say without editing too much. If the facilitator changes too many words or adds words that he or she personally prefers, group members will feel that the facilitator has taken control of the proceedings. The first rule of recording ideas is, therefore, to faithfully record what people are saying.

Since people say much more than we can record in a few crisp statements, facilitators are always challenged to create a short, concise summary of the dialogue. This is tricky because it necessitates editing, which can lead to inadvertently changing the meaning of what is said.

Skillful facilitators are good at editing so that the shortened statement still manages to be faithful to the original idea. They do this by following these rules:

Rule 1—Use their words—Listen carefully for the key words that participants use and ensure that these words are included in what is written on the flip chart. Reinforce this by saying things like:

"I'm writing the word 'disaster' because you emphasized it."
"Let me read you back what I wrote to check whether I accurately captured your point."

Be very careful about the words that are recorded.

Rule 2—Ask permission to change words—If participants struggle to articulate a point or are at a loss to find the right words, offer wording, but get member approval to ensure that what's recorded reflects what people intended to say. Say something like:

"I've shortened what you said to this... Is this okay?"
"Can I use the word...?"
"Is it okay to record that this way?"

Recording Tip

A great technique to keep up your sleeve is to ask people to dictate the exact words they want to see recorded. This is useful if you don't understand what they're saying or lost focus momentarily and can't remember what they said. In these situations say something like:

"Tell me what you want me to write down."
"Give me the exact words you need to see on the page."

This technique also works when people have rambled or shared long, convoluted ideas. Rather than taking on the task of creating a summary of their comments, ask them to take responsibility for doing this. Say something like:

"I want to be sure that I capture the important parts of your idea. Shorten that down to one or two crisp sentences that I can record."

Managing the Flip Chart

A flip chart may look innocent enough, but remember that these three-legged beasts can trip you, make your handwriting look like kindergarten scrawl, and make even familiar spelling impossible to recall. Here are some definite *do's* and *don'ts* about flip charts.

DO	DON'T
Write down exactly what members say. While their comments have to be edited somewhat, always use their key words. Check to make sure that what is written captures the meaning expressed.	Write down your personal interpretation of things. These are their notes. If unsure, ask, *"What should I write down?"*
Use verbs and make phrases fairly complete. For example, writing "work group" is not as helpful as "work group to meet Monday at 10 a.m." Always be sure the flip chart can convey meaning, even to someone who was not at the meeting.	Worry about spelling. If you make a fuss, it will inhibit members from getting up and taking a turn at facilitating.
Talk and write at the same time. This is necessary in order to maintain a good pace. Practiced facilitators can write one thing and be asking the next question.	Hide behind the flip chart or talk to it. Unless you are writing, stand squarely beside it, facing the members when reading back notes.
Move around and act alive. There is nothing worse than a facilitator who acts as though he or she is chained to the flip chart. If an important point is being made, walk closer to the person who is talking so you can better pay attention.	Stand passively at the flip chart while a long discussion is going on without writing anything down. Ideas don't need to be in complete sentences before recording them. Make note of key words and ideas. Comprehensive statements can be formulated later.
Write in black, blue, or some other dark color. Use fairly large letters so it can be read from the back of the room.	Use script unless you have great handwriting. Avoid red and pale pastels that are impossible to see from any distance.
Post flip sheets around the room so that people can keep track of what has been discussed.	Monopolize the flip chart.
Whenever appropriate, let others take over both large and small group facilitation. This builds commitment and reinforces the idea that this isn't the facilitator's meeting.	Monopolize managing the meeting process.

These do's and don'ts are as relevant to electronic recording devices as they are to paper flip charts.

Focus on Questioning

The importance of knowing how and when to ask great probing questions can't be stressed enough. In fact, effective questioning is the key facilitative technique. As a facilitator, you need to ask the right questions.

Questions invite participation. They get people thinking about issues from a different perspective. Even when acting as a neutral facilitator, you can share your good ideas by turning them into questions. Questions are also essential for getting feedback from participants about how things are going.

Effective questioning means:

- **Asking the right questions at the right time**—select the right type of question and phrase it so that it solicits the best possible response. Then, direct it to the right person.

If You Want to . . .	Then . . .
Stimulate everyone's thinking	Allow people to respond voluntarily or avoid putting an individual on the spot.
Direct the question to the group	Ask a question such as *"What experiences have any of you had with this problem?"*
Stimulate one person to think and respond	Direct the question to that individual. *"How should we handle this, Bill?"*
Tap the known resources of an expert in the group	Direct the question to that person. *"Mary, you have had a lot of experience in applying these regulations. What would you do in this case?"*

- **Handling answers to questions**—if a group member directly asks you for your opinion about the content, you have three options:
  - Redirect the question to another group member or refer it to the whole group.
  - Defer any questions that are beyond the scope of anyone present and commit to getting back to the group with an answer later.
  - Provide the answer yourself only after signaling that you are no longer playing the process role and are now providing expert input.

- **Responding to comments**—Facilitators often lose neutrality by praising an idea put forward by a member. Be careful when acknowledging the efforts of any respondents. Instead of praising the content by saying, *"That was a good idea!"* switch to praising the process instead by saying something like, *"Thank you for offering that idea."*

Facilitating is essentially a questioning activity.

Praising ideas or responding to direct questions will take you out of the facilitator role.

Be aware that responding to direct questions can take you out of the facilitator role.

Open-ended questions are used more often and are superior to closed questions.

Question Types

There are two basic question types:

1. **Closed ended**
2. **Open ended**

Each has its uses:

TYPE OF QUESTION	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Closed	Requires a one-word answer. Closes off discussion. Usually begins with Is, Can, How many, or Does.	*"Does everyone understand the changes we've discussed?"*
Open Ended	Requires more than a Yes or No answer. Stimulates thinking. Usually begins with What, How, When, or Why.	*"What ideas do you have for explaining the changes to our customer?"*

Here are some questioning do's and don'ts:

DO	DON'T
Ask clear, concise questions covering a single issue. Ask challenging questions that will stimulate thought. Ask reasonable questions based on what people know. Ask honest and relevant questions.	Ask rambling, ambiguous questions that cover multiple issues. Ask questions that don't provide an opportunity for thought. Ask questions that most people can't answer. Ask trick questions designed to fool them.

Questioning Formats

When selecting questions to ask, there is a broad range to choose from. It's important to understand how each of these question formats achieves a slightly different outcome.

Different types of questions create specific responses.

Fact-finding questions are targeted at verifiable data such as who, what, when, where, and how much. Use them to gather information about the current situation.

e.g. *"What kind of computer equipment are you now using?"*
"How much training did staff receive at the start?"

Feeling-finding questions ask for subjective information that gets at the participants' opinions, feelings, values, and beliefs. They help you understand views and they contain words like *think* or *feel.*

e.g. *"How do you feel about the effectiveness of the new equipment?"*
"Do you think the staff felt they received enough training?"

Tell-me-more questions can help you find out more about what the participants are saying. They encourage the speaker to provide more details.

e.g. *"Tell me more." "Can you elaborate on that?"*
"Can you be more specific?"

Best/least questions help you understand potential opportunities in the present situation. They let you test for the outer limits of participants' wants and needs.

e.g. *"What's the best thing about receiving a new computer?"*
"What's the worst thing about the new equipment?"

Third-party questions help uncover thoughts in an indirect manner. They're designed to help people express sensitive information.

e.g. *"Some people find that computer training is too time-consuming. How does that sound to you?"*
"There is some concern about overly autocratic managers in many factories. Can you relate to that concern?"

"Magic wand" questions let you explore people's true desires. Also known as "crystal ball" questions, these are useful in temporarily removing obstacles from a person's mind.

e.g. *"If time and money were no obstacle, what sort of a computer system would you design for the department?"*

Sample Probing Questions

The following sample questions are designed to delve more deeply into a problem situation.

- How would you describe the current situation in this department?
- How would your most important customer describe it?
- How would a senior manager describe it?
- How long has this situation been going on?
- What makes it worse? . . . better?
- To what extent are people aware of the problem?
- How do people feel about the situation?
- Why hasn't the problem been solved?
- Who wants change to take place? Who does not?
- Who contributes to the problem?
- How do *you* contribute to the problem?
- If the problem were totally resolved, what would the ideal situation look like?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, how serious would you say this problem is?

1	2	3	4	5
not serious at all		somewhat serious		very serious

- What are the most significant barriers to solving this problem?
- What are the parameters of this initiative? (time, money, materials)
- Are any solutions going to be taboo or unacceptable?
- How would you rate the overall level of commitment to making changes that have been agreed to?

1	2	3	4	5
Low		Medium		High

- What are some boundaries that you would suggest for this initiative?
- What would be the best possible outcome of this initiative? . . . The worst?
- What are the things that will help this initiative succeed?
- What are the potential blocks to success?
- What rules or guidelines would you like to suggest to guide the group interaction?

Best and Worst Facilitator Practices

Some of the best things that a facilitator can do:

- carefully assess the needs of the members
- probe sensitively into people's feelings
- create an open and trusting atmosphere
- help people understand why they're there
- view self as serving the group's needs
- make members the center of attention
- speak in simple and direct language
- work hard to stay neutral
- display energy and appropriate levels of assertiveness
- champion ideas he or she does not personally favor
- treat all participants as equals
- stay flexible and ready to change direction if necessary
- listen intently to fully understand what's being said
- make notes that reflect what participants mean
- periodically summarize related ideas into a coherent summary
- know how to use a wide range of process tools
- make sure every session ends with clear steps for the next meeting
- ensure that participants feel ownership for what has been achieved
- end on a positive and optimistic note

Some of the worst things a facilitator can do:

- remain oblivious to what the group thinks or needs
- never check member concerns
- fail to listen carefully to what's being said
- lose track of key ideas
- take poor notes or change the meaning of what's said
- try to be the center of attention
- get defensive
- get into personality battles
- put people down
- avoid or ignore conflict
- let a few people or the leader dominate
- never check how the meeting is going
- be overly passive on process
- push ahead on an irrelevant agenda
- have no alternative approaches
- let discussions get badly sidetracked
- let discussions ramble without proper closure
- be oblivious about when to stop
- be insensitive to cultural diversity issues
- use inappropriate humor

Facilitator Behaviors and Strategies

Regardless of whether you're a facilitator from within the group or from outside, the team's leader or a member, the following are parameters for facilitator behaviors.

Be Informed—Successful facilitators always gather extensive data about their prospective participants in order to fully understand both their business and their needs. They survey and interview participants, read background reports, and use prepared questions to build a complete picture of the group's situation.

Be Optimistic—Facilitators don't let disinterest, antagonism, shyness, cynicism, or other negative reactions throw them off. Instead, they focus on what can be achieved and strategies to draw the best from each participant.

Be Consensual—Facilitation is fundamentally a consensus-building process. Facilitators always strive to create outcomes that reflect the ideas of all participants equally.

Be Flexible—Successful facilitators always have a process plan for all meetings, yet at the same time are always ready to toss it aside and change direction if that's what is needed. Really great facilitators possess a wide repertoire of process tools and come prepared with alternative strategies.

Be Understanding—Facilitators need to understand that there are great pressures on employees in today's workplace and that antagonistic or cynical behaviors may be a result of high stress levels.

Be Alert—Accomplished facilitators are expert people watchers. They pay careful attention to group dynamics and notice what's going on at all times. They are attuned to noticing both how people interact and how well they're achieving the task.

Be Firm—Good facilitation is not a passive activity, but one that calls for substantial assertiveness. Facilitators should always be ready to step in and redirect an ineffective process.

Be Unobtrusive—The facilitator should do as little talking as possible. The participants should be doing all of the talking. The facilitator says only enough to give instructions, stop arguments, keep things on track and sum up. Trying to be the center of attention or make yourself look important is a misuse of your position.

Facilitating should be an egoless activity. The purpose is to make the group succeed, not to make you look really important and clever. An effective facilitator will leave a group convinced that *"We did it ourselves!"*

Facilitation Cue Card

To start a facilitation

- Welcome participants
- Introduce members
- Explain your role
- Clarify session goal
- Explain the process
- Set time frames
- Appoint timekeeper
- Create parking lot
- Start the discussion

Remember to:

- Stay neutral
- Listen actively
- Ask questions
- Paraphrase continuously
- Provide summaries
- Record ideas
- Synthesize ideas
- Keep on track

During a facilitation

- Check the purpose
- Check the process
- Check the pace
- Test assumptions
- Maintain the climate

Conflict Management

1. *Vent concerns and feelings*
2. *Solve problems*

To end a facilitation

- Summarize discussions
- clarify and ratify decisions
- Create action plans
- Force-field analysis
- Round up leftover items
- Help create next agenda
- Clarify follow-up process
- Evaluate the session
- Systematic problem solving

Toolkit

Visioning
S.W.O.T/S.O.A.R.
Brainstorming
Multi-voting
Gap analysis
Root cause analysis
Decision grids

Be soft on people—hard on issues!

Practice Feedback Sheets

An excellent way of improving your facilitation skills is to ask a colleague to observe you in action and give you feedback. On the following pages are two different observation sheets for feedback purposes. The first focuses on core practices, while the second emphasizes the key elements in an effective process.

Learning to facilitate takes practice.

Regardless of which sheet is used, the following steps are suggested:

1. First describe what you think you did well. Ask yourself: *"What did I do effectively? What were my strengths?"*
2. Next, invite the observer to offer specific observations of the things that he or she saw you do well.
3. Finally, have the observer provide concrete suggestions for improvements that would enhance your facilitation effectiveness.

Notes

Core Practices Observation Sheet

Facilitator:

Behaviors that help

__ listens actively
__ maintains eye contact
__ helps identify needs
__ gets buy-in
__ surfaces concerns
__ defines problems
__ brings everyone into the discussion
__ uses good body language and intonation
__ paraphrases continuously
__ accepts and uses feedback
__ checks time and pace
__ provides useful feedback
__ monitors and adjusts the process
__ asks relevant, probing questions
__ keeps an open attitude
__ stays neutral
__ offers helpful suggestions
__ is optimistic and positive
__ manages conflict well
__ takes a problem-solving approach
__ stays focused on process
__ ping-pongs ideas around
__ makes accurate notes that reflect the discussion
__ effectively uses humor
__ looks calm and pleasant
__ is flexible about changing the approach used
__ skillfully summarizes what is said
__ knows when to stop

Behaviors that hinder

__ is oblivious to group needs
__ no follow-up on concerns
__ poor listening
__ strays into content
__ loses track of key ideas
__ makes poor notes
__ ignores conflicts
__ provides no alternatives for structuring the discussion
__ gets defensive
__ doesn't paraphrase enough
__ lets a few people dominate
__ never checks how it's going
__ is the center of attention
__ lets the group get sidetracked
__ projects a poor image
__ uses negative or sarcastic tone
__ talks too much
__ puts people down
__ doesn't know when to stop

Additional Observations:

Process Flow Observation Sheet

Facilitator:

Clarifies the purpose

Creates buy-in if needed

Checks assumptions

Makes sure there are norms

Establishes the process

Sets time frames

Stays neutral and objective

Paraphrases continuously

Acts lively and positively

Makes clear notes

Asks good probing questions

Makes helpful suggestions

Encourages participation

Addresses conflict

Sets a good pace

Checks the process

Moves smoothly to new topics

Makes clear and timely summaries

Knows when to stop

Facilitation Skill Levels

Mastering the art of neutrality, keeping notes, and asking questions at meetings is not all there is to facilitating. Being a true facilitator means developing your competency at four distinct levels.

Review the skills needed at each of the four levels described below. Then complete the facilitation skills and needs assessment instrument that follows to identify your current strengths and future training needs.

Level 1

Understanding concepts, values, and beliefs; use of facilitative behaviors such as active listening, paraphrasing, questioning, summarizing; managing time; encouraging participation; keeping clear and accurate notes; using basic tools like problem solving and action planning.

Level 2

Mastering process tools; designing meetings; skilled at using the right decision-making method, achieving consensus, and getting true closure; handling feedback activities and conducting process checks; using exit surveys; good at managing meetings in an effective manner; able to help a group set goals and objectives that are measurable; skilled at checking assumptions and challenging ideas.

Level 3

Skilled at managing conflict and making immediate interventions; able to deal with resistance and personal attacks; make design changes on the spot; size up a group and use the right strategies for its developmental stage; manage survey feedback exercises; able to design and conduct interviews and focus groups; design and implement surveys; consolidate ideas from a mass of information into coherent summaries.

Level 4

Design and implement process interventions in response to complex organizational issues; use tools to promote process improvement, customer intimacy, and overall organizational effectiveness; able to support teams in the various stages of team development.

Facilitation Skills Self-Assessment

Assess your *current* skill levels by rating yourself according to the basic skill areas outlined below.

Rank your *current* skill level using the five-point scale below.

1	2	3	4	5
skills lacking		some skills		total mastery

Level 1 **Rating**

1. Understand the concepts, values, and beliefs of facilitation ________
2. Skilled at active listening, paraphrasing, questioning, and summarizing key points ________
3. Able to manage time and maintain a good pace ________
4. Armed with techniques for getting active participation and generating ideas ________
5. Keep clear and accurate notes that reflect what participants have said ________
6. Familiar with the basic tools of systematic problem solving, brainstorming, and force-field analysis ________

Level 2 **Rating**

1. Knowledge of a wide range of procedural tools essential for structuring group discussions ________
2. Able to design meetings using a broad set of process tools ________
3. Knowledge of the six main decision-making approaches ________
4. Skilled at achieving consensus and gaining closure ________
5. Skilled at using feedback processes. Able to hear and accept personal feedback ________
6. Able to set goals and objectives that are measurable ________
7. Able to ask good probing questions that challenge own and others' assumptions in a non-threatening way ________
8. Able to stop the action and check on how things are going ________
9. Able to use exit surveys to improve performance ________
10. Able to manage meetings in an orderly and effective manner ________

Level 3 **Rating**

1. Able to manage conflict between participants and remain composed ________
2. Able to make quick and effective interventions ________
3. Able to deal with resistance non-defensively ________
4. Skilled at dealing with personal attacks ________

5. Able to redesign meeting processes on the spot __________
6. Able to size up a group and use the right strategies for their developmental stage __________
7. Able to implement survey feedback exercises __________
8. Able to design and conduct interviews and focus groups __________
9. Knowledgeable about survey design and questionnaire development __________
10. Able to integrate and consolidate ideas from a mass of information and create coherent summaries __________

Level 4 **Rating**

1. Able to design and implement process interventions in response to complex organizational issues __________
2. Able to facilitate process improvement, customer intimacy, and other organization development activities __________
3. Able to support teams in their forming, storming, and performing stages __________

My current skills (Include all the items you ranked as 4 or 5)

____

____

____

____

____

The skills I most need to work on (Choose the ones most immediately important from all the ones ranked as 1 or 2)

____

____

____

____

____