

THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

By Robert Bacal 1998

Most people associate the word “facilitator” with the training environment. Often, that person at the front of the room leading a training session is referred to as the course facilitator. While it is true that some seminar leaders do “facilitate,” the facilitation role is often important in other areas. For example, the chairperson at a meeting often takes on the responsibility for facilitating the meeting, rather than “running it.” The government employee involved in mediation of disputes between other parties is also a facilitator. Human resources staff members often facilitate discussions in various contexts. And staff that works with groups of stakeholders and members of the public may be well advised to take on a facilitating role rather than a directing one.

For those of you who already are involved in facilitating, or those of you that may do so in the future, we are going to look at what the facilitation role entails.

Basic Definition

A facilitator is an individual whose job is to help to manage a process of information exchange. While an “expert’s” role is to offer advice, particularly about the content of a discussion, the facilitator’s role is to help with HOW the discussion is proceeding.

In short, the facilitator’s responsibility is to address the journey, rather than the destination.

When Facilitation Is Appropriate

A facilitation approach is appropriate when the organization is concerned not only with the decision that is made, but also with the way the decision is made. For example, an organization may be moving away from an autocratic style of management to a participatory one. So, to encourage staff to embrace more involvement, the manager may choose to act as a facilitator rather than an expert or the final arbiter for the decision. In this situation longer-term process goals become as important as getting a good decision.

As another example, let’s envision a government employee whose task is to communicate with members of the public/interest groups regarding legislation and regulation. Since one purpose of this communication is to reduce resistance to legislation and regulations, the employee can choose a more facilitative, consultative role, rather than being a simple “bearer of information.” In this case, the facilitation role is more likely to encourage others to be more cooperative.

Competencies & Characteristics

If you are involved in facilitation (even if you’ve never called it that), or may be involved, you might want to consider the competencies and characteristics of an effective facilitator as outlined by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (Canada).

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THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR, CONTINUED

Competencies

The facilitator:

- Distinguishes process from content
- Manages the client relationship and prepares thoroughly
- Uses time and space intentionally
- Is skilled in evoking participation and creativity
- Is practiced in honoring the group and affirming its wisdom
- Is capable of maintaining objectivity
- Is skilled in reading the underlying dynamics of the group
- Releases blocks to the process
- Adapts to the changing situation
- Assumes (or shares) responsibility for the group journey
- Demonstrates professionalism, self-confidence, and authenticity
- Maintains personal integrity.

Characteristics

The facilitator commits to a style of:

- Asking rather than telling
- Paying personal compliments
- Willing to spend time in building relationships rather than always being task-oriented
- Initiating conversation rather than waiting for someone else to do so
- Asking for others' opinions rather than always having to offer their own
- Negotiating rather than dictating decision-making
- Listening without interrupting
- Emoting but able to be restrained when the situation requires it
- Drawing energy from outside themselves rather than from within
- Basing decisions upon intuitions rather than having to have facts
- Having sufficient self-confidence that they can look someone in the eye when talking to them
- More persuasive than sequential
- More enthusiastic than systematic
- More outgoing than serious
- More like a counselor than a sergeant
- More like a coach than a scientist
- Being naturally curious about people, things, and life in general
- Keeping the big picture in mind while working on the nitty-gritty.

Conclusion

If you have a natural task-oriented style, you may find it difficult to be thrust into a situation where facilitating is a more effective approach. It isn't always easy to give up the "expert" position in a group. You may find it useful to examine your involvement in group activities to determine if you can translate the above characteristics and competencies into changes in your behavior that will allow you to contribute more effectively to the group and to achieving your organization's goals.