



Unit 1

Facilitation Skills Basics

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- Distinguish facilitation from instruction and training¹
- Identify the competencies linked to effective small group facilitation¹
- Understand the difference between content and process¹
- Identify the stages of team development and ways to help teams through each stage¹
- Use common process tools to make meetings easier and more productive¹

Unit 1

Facilitation Skills Basics

Defining Your Role

Facilitation, Training, and Chairing

Like so many other things in our business life, meetings continue to evolve. When U.S. Army General Henry Martyn Robert was asked to chair some meetings in the 1870's, he looked at how chaotic they were. He felt that he did not understand enough about how they should take place, so he researched and drafted a set of rules called "**Robert's Rules of Order**" that were based loosely on parliamentary procedure. They have been adapted since that time and used in many workplaces and societies.

While many meetings are run by a chair (or chairperson, chairman, or chairwoman, depending on where you are), facilitated meetings are different. (We'll talk about how and why that is shortly.)

Some people refer to any facilitated session as a workshop rather than a meeting, with the idea that participants expect to work in a workshop, whereas they meet in a meeting. We are pretty comfortable with either term. As a facilitator, if you are invited to lead a session, see what works best for the group as you plan the program, choose a space, set a time, and consider what's available.

There are many definitions of facilitation, just as there are books and articles written about it.

Facilitation means "to make easy," so the job of the facilitator is to create a meeting environment where work is made easier for the participants.

That's a pretty simple definition. Facilitation will have different applications and uses in different settings. Sometimes a facilitator is asked to moderate between parties who disagree (which is probably a role better suited to a **moderator**). Often, facilitators are asked to act as a process leader or group leader.

As a **process leader**, the facilitator manages the group process, which allows the participants to pay attention to the content of the work. This is a pretty traditional explanation of facilitation, where the facilitator guides the team through the agenda, focusing on the people involved, and remains detached from the content and the outcomes.

Large Group Exercise

Do you get asked to facilitate meetings or workshops?

Do the people who ask you understand the difference between the terms, or do they use words like facilitation, training, instruction, and chairing interchangeably?

Can you describe the similarities and differences between facilitation, training, and chairing?

How Facilitators Work

Key Skills

A facilitator is someone who helps a group to collaborate, work effectively, and to learn different ways of thinking about things. The facilitator does not take sides on an issue or share their point of view, since

this might sway the results that the group achieves. An effective facilitator has excellent communication skills, as well as an advanced understanding of group dynamics, problem solving, consensus building, conflict resolution, and facilitation tools and processes.

A facilitative individual is someone who is easy to work with, a team player, and aware of individual and group dynamics. They may be leading facilitation, or they might be a part of a facilitated group. They are knowledgeable in the interpersonal skills of communication, collaborative problem solving and planning, consensus building, and conflict resolution. Some leaders approach their work and teams from a facilitative perspective, in contrast to someone who leads by directing.

Facilitative behaviors and skills are essential for anyone who expects to succeed in working collaboratively in groups or organizations today. Facilitative skills honor, enhance, and focus the wisdom and knowledge that is otherwise unexpressed in most groups. They are critical skills for developing what we have come to think of as the learning organization.

Roles of a Facilitator

One big difference between training and facilitating is that facilitators are content neutral while being process advocates. Facilitators don't take sides, and they don't have a stake in the outcome. They are often an outsider or third party to the issues involved. (If not, they have to step to that outside role during facilitation.) The facilitator is there to help a group work through a process—a process that is fair, inclusive, and provides a space for every member of the group to participate fully.

Let's look at some roles and behaviors that can help a facilitator achieve this.

The facilitator enables full involvement.

When people get into a group, they often fall into predictable behaviors. Depending on how their ideas have been received in the past, they may hesitate to make their thoughts known, to take risks, or to consider things that could be done differently. They may not wish to contradict what they have heard from management, or to move outside their comfort zone. The facilitator has to understand this range of dynamics. They need to make sure that people get involved and that they can safely and openly express themselves.

In order to get people involved, a facilitator can use icebreakers and energizers, which help to ease tensions within the group. They can also use small group discussions that encourage safety and freedom to speak.

The facilitator creates a respectful environment.

If a group does not understand one another, or the purpose of the session, they will have a difficult time embracing processes and ideas. They may feel threatened and resort to defending their own ideas, territories, or perspectives. People really struggle to focus on someone else's ideas unless they feel that their own ideas are understood. It falls to the facilitator to establish an environment of trust and safety. These environments are not simply established by definition: people must get to know one another, so facilitated sessions can be expected to take longer than a typical workshop or meeting.

To help create a respectful environment, the facilitator uses techniques like brainstorming, mind-mapping, mirroring, paraphrasing, and summarizing to promote understanding. Definitions for technical terms or industry jargon are shared to ensure that people reach understanding.

The facilitator builds sustainable agreements.

The mainstay of facilitation is to create an environment where participants reach consensus and then create sustainable agreements. This means that the facilitator must be able to expose the group's ideas and then help them to consider, reconsider, and uncover new solutions as opposed to picking the "easy" one or the "right" one. If the group comes to agreement but they do not also have consensus (meaning that they all agree at least enough to support an idea), then the agreement will not be sustainable or enforceable. This means that any changes the group agrees on will not take place.

The facilitator teaches new thinking skills.

The facilitator will use a variety of facilitation skills to help people evaluate solutions and analyze cause and effect. The facilitator can help participants have civilized disagreements and see how conflicts can be resolved by clear communication.

Facilitation Skill Levels

Like many things, facilitation is a learned skill. It takes practice and experience to learn to remain neutral, keep track of multiple lines of thought and conversation, take accurate notes, and ask questions that stimulate thinking. Several teachers on facilitation break down the skill into four levels, which are shared below.

Level One: Introductory

At this level, a facilitator is able to apply understanding of the idea of facilitation. They may be a facilitative leader already. The application of skills like active listening, questioning, and managing time is complemented by encouraging participation, keeping accurate notes, problem solving, and action planning.

Level Two: Growing

Once you have some experience at gaining consensus within groups you work with, and you have seen the success of sustainable agreements and completed action plans, you continue to grow. At this stage, you will be:

- Understanding additional process tools that are well matched to the matters being considered¹
- Increasing your skill by using the most effective decision making and process tools¹
- Skillfully challenging assumptions¹
- Setting measureable goals¹
- Using surveys at the end of facilitation¹

Level Three: Skilled

At this level, you are competently able to handle feedback and manage conflict (even to that state of agreeing to disagree, or simply having civilized disagreements). You can implement design changes, offer intervention, and apply your knowledge of the group's developmental stage to work toward consensus. You are able to use higher level tools, design your own surveys, and create comprehensive summaries and reports for members of the group and stakeholders.

Level Four: Advanced

At this stage, you have had experience with many different groups and dynamics. You are able to facilitate for complex organizational issues, you use the full range of tools in the facilitator's toolkit, and the feedback from your sessions is that you are providing support and facilitating at a level with top facilitators.

Facilitation at a Glance

Let's look at some things that you can do to ensure facilitation success.

Before the Facilitation

- Check the meeting space and make sure it is appropriate for what's needed¹
- Conducts a needs assessment: what are the stakeholders looking for?¹
- Interview or survey members of the group if appropriate¹
- Draft the agenda and send it to participants¹
- Select activities and processes that will be appropriate for the group¹
- Select back-up processes that you can use depending on how things unfold¹

To Start Facilitation

- 1
 - Welcome participants¹
 - Have members introduce themselves, especially if they don't know one another¹
 - Use an appropriate icebreaker to set the environment¹
 - Explain your role¹
- 1
 - Clarify the goal of the session¹
- 1
 - Introduce the agenda and make changes based on feedback; group acceptance is important here¹
 - Establish ground rules (norms)¹
 - Explain the process¹
 - Set time frames¹
 - Appoint a time keeper and a minute taker¹

During Facilitation

- Ask, "How's this going?"¹
- Check the pace: too fast, too slow?¹
- Check whether the techniques are working¹
- Obtain and offer feedback as needed¹
- Ensure that all members are able to participate fully¹
- Summarize periodically and at end of session¹

To End Facilitation

- 1
 - Help members make a clear statement of what was decided¹
 - Develop clear steps with dates and names¹
 - Check the parking lot and any leftover items¹
 - Help create next agenda¹
 - Clarify follow-up process and accountabilities¹

Establishing Ground Rules

Similar to any other meeting, a facilitated session needs some ground rules. The rules help participants understand what is expected, to focus on what's important, and to help the facilitator to keep things on track. There are several ways to establish ground rules (also referred to as **norms**).

| Advantages Of Having The Group Establish Their Own Norms | Advantages Of Having The Facilitator Set The Norms |
|--|--|
| | |

Generate a list of ground rules, or norms, for the remainder of this workshop.

One principle of facilitation is that if people don't participate in and own the solutions to the problems, or agree to the decisions made, implementation will be half-hearted at best, possibly misunderstood, and quite likely to fail. Another principle is the importance of being able to elicit, harness, and focus the vast intellectual capital (the good ideas) and goodwill that is within the members of the group.

This approach does several things. First, it emphasizes that the facilitator is on an equal level with the participants. It also encourages participants to solve the problem on their own, using tools provided by the facilitator. This helps the team grow together, and it also fosters an atmosphere of respect and trust — the sort of atmosphere that is conducive to successful meetings.

Parking Lots

In addition to the ground rules, the facilitator can set up a parking lot at the beginning of the meeting. This is done simply by writing “parking lot” at the top of a flip chart page and hanging it up in the room. As the meeting unfolds, the facilitator may put questions that cannot be answered during the meeting on the sheet. Items that cannot be completed in time can also be posted here. Following the meeting, the facilitator must make sure that these questions are answered, or issues added to subsequent agendas in order for participants to realize that everything is being dealt with.

Planning Transitions

A facilitator can typically be asked to facilitate more than one topic. A sign of a professional facilitator is to plan the transitions between different sections on the agenda. This can be done through comments or an activity. Once the group seems to have reached consensus or exhausted a topic, the facilitator can ask:

- Does anyone have anything else to add before we move on?¹
- Are we all ready to move on?¹
- Tim, did we address your concerns?¹
- Is everyone okay with the tasks and roles that were defined?¹

A five minute energizer activity or quick bathroom break can also make an effective transition.

Content and Process

While facilitators are responsible for the process, it is participants who are responsible for and manage the content. Let’s define those things now and see how this works in a facilitated meeting.

What is content?

What is process?

Further Reading:

- ASTD. *10 Steps to Successful Facilitation*. ASTD, 2008.
- Bens, Ingrid. *Facilitating to Lead!* Jossey-Bass, 2006.

