

Facilitation

What is facilitation?

Facilitation is essentially a tool that helps direct and guide discussions, meetings, and decision-making processes. It allows everyone a chance to speak their mind, and thus to feel like they are a part of the group. Often several members of the group will take on one of the roles involved in the facilitation process: facilitator, time-keeper, note-taker, and vibes-watcher.

Why is facilitation important?

Facilitation keeps things focused, allows everyone a chance to participate, and helps the group get tasks accomplished and decisions made. If your meetings are not facilitated, most likely they will be filled with tangents and side conversations – which make the meetings grueling and just plain boring. Furthermore, two or three people may end up dominating the meetings, leaving everyone else feeling unwelcome, and unimportant.

The role of the facilitator

It is important to emphasize that a facilitator is not in control of the group. She or he does not ultimately make the final decision on anything (in fact, any member of the group can be the facilitator, and the position can rotate from week to week). The facilitator is simply responsible for ensuring that the meetings are inclusive, productive, and effective. To do this, she or he should help the group establish some ground rules so that everyone knows how the meetings will proceed. Then she or he must make sure that everyone sticks to them.

Here are some examples of ground-rules

Method of decision-making: You can work by a simple majority vote. You can use majority consensus, where points of view in the minority are often addressed, and can somewhat modify the final decision. Or you can work by absolute consensus, where no decision is made without *full* agreement in the

group. Different methods can be used based on the importance of the decision at hand.

Directed questions: It may be decided that the facilitator can call on those who haven't raised their hands or said anything at the meeting. And, of course, those who are called on have the right to pass.

Bike rack: If something important arises but isn't on the agenda or is way off-topic, you can put it on a "bike rack," a list of subjects to be discussed at a later time.

Stacking: In large groups, stacking is almost essential for meetings. With a stack, a list is kept of those who raise their hands, and people are called on in the order that they have raised their hands. In small groups, a stack is usually not necessary, as long as the group stays on topic and all participants have an opportunity to speak.

Hand signals: Oftentimes, a hand signal is better than saying it, since it minimizes interruptions in the discussion. For example, sometimes people wiggle their fingers for "I agree." or they form a P with their hands to indicate that they have a "point of information" on someone's comment.

Other important roles

Time-keeper: It is useful to set time limits for each item on the agenda. Otherwise, the meetings become too long, and folks won't want to come back. The time-keeper lets the group know how much time they have prior to each agenda item. If someone suggests that more time be taken, the time-keeper should ask for agreement from the whole group.

Note-taker: It is important that one member record what is discussed and decided during the meeting so that the same discussion or decision is not repeated unnecessarily. In addition, it is good for the note-taker to begin the meeting with a review of the notes from the previous meeting – to refresh folks' memories, and help those who weren't there catch up.

Vibes-watcher: Sometimes things get a little tense, or just plain boring. A vibes-watcher is essential for monitoring the atmosphere and making sure things don't get out of hand. If they do, she or he can call a time-out, and then folks can regroup in five minutes or whatever the set break time happens to be.

Now that you know the details, refer to the sheet on ESP, for the three principles of running a meeting. And then you are ready to roll.

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