

FACILITATING GROUPS

A facilitator is committed to the success of the group in meeting its goals. Facilitation is an example of servant leadership:

- * Success depends on the willingness of the group to follow the suggestions and direction of the facilitator.
- * The facilitator earns this trust only through his/her ability to act fairly and impeccably in serving the vision of the group and process of the meeting.

Groups must be able to count on the neutrality of the facilitator:

- * Facilitators should usually not participate in the content of the meeting when facilitating
- * When essential to give your personal opinion on content, first let the group know you are 'stepping out of role'
- * While possible to facilitate when you are the actual leader of a group, you must be very clear about what power the group does or doesn't have to make decisions about the items at hand
- * Many leaders prefer to hand over facilitation duties to someone else, leaving them free to participate in the discussions.

There are many styles of facilitating:

- * Like other forms of leadership, facilitation is as much about who you are, as the tools you use
- * Each facilitator must evolve a style that is natural to their personality.
- * Different organizational cultures will respond better to different styles of facilitation

Monitoring process

The greatest challenge for many facilitators is to track at the same time the process and energy of the group, monitoring:

- * time
 - is the process keeping to the allotted time?
- * participation
 - are some members dominating in an unhealthy way?
 - are significant numbers of people not participating?
- * collaboration
 - is the nature of the process helping building team cohesion?
- * energy
 - is the quality of group energy appropriate to the task at hand?

Multi-tracking

Skillful facilitation demands considerable awareness of multiple factors. The ability to simultaneously monitor more than one process at a time is called "multi-tracking." It is beyond anyone's ability to closely watch all the above-mentioned variables at the same moment in time. By being in a state of heightened alertness, an experienced facilitator will start to pick up warning signals from the group when they cross a certain threshold of intensity, in the same way that a good driver is continuously scanning the road ahead and picking up potential hazards. Some helpful hints:

- * Imagine that you have several scanners like radar. At set intervals, perform a mental scan with each of your radars: How is the group energy? Levels of participation? Time?
- * Use the group to monitor its own progress. Take "preventative" 1-minute process checks every hour or so, asking the group to evaluate the quality of its own work and process.
- * Have someone in the group sit out of the proceedings and act as a 'witness to the process.' Invite them to sit next to you, and offer you and/or the group input during the course of the meeting.
- * When the process seems like it might be 'off' but you're not sure what's going on, try asking the group: "It feels pretty down in here. I'm not sure what's going on, but let's take a quick pulse-- 'How are we doing?'"

Types of Interventions

There are basically three varieties of possible interventions:

1) re-structure process:

change the group process by re-organizing the structure of the dialogue (dyads, small groups, etc.); using problem-solving processes; inserting a "process break" or changing the original agenda.

2) re-focus content:

harness the group's work output by re-focusing conversation on the original topic, approaching the same topic from a different perspective, or changing topics completely

3) shift energy:

change the feeling-tone and energy of the group through feedback, inquiry, confrontation, suggestion, inspiration, humor, or modeling.

Examples of Interventions

problem #1: stuck and unable to solve problem

* change structure:

"We seem to be stuck. Would you be willing to try a different approach? (Use a problem-solving process.)"

* re-focus content:

"We don't seem to be getting anywhere on this track. Let's focus on_____."

* shift energy:

"We're pretty bogged down. Let's take a break, maybe get some fresh air...and see if we can't come back ready for a breakthrough."

problem #4: boggy, tired energy

* re-structure:

~~take an energy break or use a structure that tends to raise energy such as brainstorming or dyads~~

* re-focus content:

"I'm noticing that energy is low. Are we focusing on the right issue? Or is there something else that we would have more energy for?"

* shift energy: "Our energy seems boggy. This issues deserves our best. Can we all wake up and give this our best energy...or should we call take a break/call it a day...?"

problem #5: non-productive dissension or conflict with no listening

* change structure:

"We don't seem to be getting anywhere like this. I suggest we use a talking stick for a while, and see if we can't begin to hear each other better."

or:

"Let's put on the flip chart what we agree on, then clarify the actual areas of disagreement and work them one by one."

* re-focus content:

"It seems that we have having trouble agreeing on _____. Instead, why don't we look at _____ and see if we can get on the same page together."

* shift energy:

"Hey, we have a great confrontation brewing here. Why don't we save it for the WTO?"

or

"I'm really concerned that if we don't start really listening to each other, this meeting will be over and we'll have no budget. Please, remember we're on the same team here!... (pregnant pause)

“Could we perhaps limit our conversations to only three at a time.”
problem #9: quality of work outwork sub-par

* change structure:

“We’ve taken it to a certain point, but I’m not convinced we have the best solution. Let’s try _____ (use problem-solving process)

* shift energy:

“We’ve been working hard, but I know we can work smarter and better. What do you think we need to do here?”

problem #10: pace of conversation too fast; insufficient listening and reflection

* change structure:

“This is a really important decision. It feels to me like we should slow down the pace and make sure we have a good and thorough process. Let’s do a go-around with a talking stick.” (or: “Would you all be willing to leave a five-second pause after someone finishes, before speaking.”)

* shift energy:

“This is an important conversation, and I think we need to drop down a level here. (pause) Would you all be willing to bring your best attention and listening here? (longer pause) Let’s take a few moments of silence and then slow it down...”

problem #11: pace of work too slow; not achieving results efficiently

* change structure:

“I think we could be more productive if we broke into small groups for 20 minutes, giving each group the responsibility for _____”

* re-focus content:

“I think we can get this done more efficiently if we focus all our comments on _____”

* shift energy:

What to do about major breakdowns?

It's obviously hard to give a generic answer, since it depends on the problem and the diagnosis. But here are some examples:

* change structure:

"This meeting is going south fast. Would you be willing to all go with a suggestion for a way to get us back on track? Here it is _____." (1. fishbowl 2. council 3. _____)

or

"I propose we take a break. How about I'll get together with several of you and see if we can't come up with a way to make this work? Any volunteers?"

* shift energy:

"Hey folks. I'm doing the best I can to serve you and get what we need from the meeting. If we don't shift the way we're working together, I'm afraid we're all going to leave here pretty unhappy. Please, please help me out!"

or

"I think we've been successful at achieving total meltdown. Yes? O.K., this is pretty left field, but we've got nothing to lose. Let's all _____

1. dead ants

2. five minutes all-out dancing

3. Take a few minutes of silence. Reflect on what we're most deeply committed to in this organization..... Now, let's go around the circle once...each share whatever is in your heart.

4. Go outside for 20 minutes. Make a list of all your frustrations, complaints, and negative feelings. I'll leave a garbage can by the door. On your way back in, ceremonially drop the paper (and our egos) in the garbage can, and let's see if we can't come back and get some work done.

MOVING GROUPS FROM LIMITATION TO POSSIBILITY

1) Deep listening

It is difficult to let go of the past without having been heard. As a leader, your task here is to let people know you really want to hear their situation, to bear witness to their pain and frustration.

2) Catharsis

Feeling like a victim is an emotional, energetic experience. Part of letting go of the past may be an emotional or physical purging. This may happen spontaneously, or can be ritualized.

3) Evoke purpose and vision

People can be inspired out of their helplessness. At the right moment, a leader (or a group process) can sound a note of hope, of possibility, that resonates in peoples' hearts, awakening their power.

4) Confront

There is a thin line between listening compassionately to peoples' frustrations, and colluding in their perceived helplessness. At the right moment, groups may be best served by confronting head-on their victimhood. Be a mirror to the group. Help them see the consequences of remaining in this state. Think of rousing someone from sleep in an emergency.

5) Shift energy

Again, at the right moment, the energy of a passive group can be turned by humor, teasing, modeling or physical activity.

6) Shift perspective

Using tools like re-framing to create conceptual breakthroughs in thinking and new possibilities.

TOP TEN SCREW-UPS FOR FACILITATORS

- 1) Getting tight and controlling like an insecure substitute teacher... ~~watching the group rebel like unruly school kids...as you get more and more tight.~~
- 2) Letting the group go on and on...getting nowhere...painfully watching the life, energy and commitment drain out of the group... and just letting it drag on...dying in front of your eyes...and you watch.
- 3) Allowing the interaction to become all hub and spoke with you at the center. A concern is raised. You try to fix it. There's a question. You answer it. There's a suggestion. You evaluate it.
- 4) Being unwilling to make the tough confrontations because you want to be liked.
- 5) Engaging in long, long, long 'discussions' about which process to use.
- 6) Arrogantly scolding the group for not doing it right (like you had no part in it), making them feel badly...then criticizing them for getting defensive.
- 7) Never clarifying where the power to decide really lies in the group...and watching everything unravel.
- 8) You join with the group in descending into a bottomless pit of internal process, while all connection with the larger organization and external reality is lost.
- 9) Subtly (or not so subtly) pushing your own point of view and agenda while pretending to be 'facilitating.'
- 10) Allowing time to be completely eaten up on the first two agenda items and never getting to the most important challenge facing the team.