



THE ROLE OF A FACILITATOR

A meeting facilitator is a guide, taking the group to a predetermined place (an answer to a specific driving question) in a predetermined length of time. Don't confuse "**an answer**" with "**the answer.**" The answer is of no consequence to a facilitator... **an** answer is.

The facilitator is not a teacher, trainer, instructor, or mentor.

The facilitator is a guide helping the group cross a series of barriers, and moving the group toward an answer to a driving question. During this trip, the facilitator assures all participants of certain privileges and rights; in return the facilitator retains a significant amount of authority and power over the process.

The facilitator's job is to keep the group on time, focused, and bring everyone back safely.

The facilitator is a neutral servant of the group who listens more than talks, then summarizes what is said.

The facilitator uses active listening, does not evaluate, protects the individual from criticism and abuse, encourages broad participation, senses group dynamics and moods, keeps the process on track and on time, and plans and executes meeting logistics.

Above all else, the facilitator's role is bounded by process and should not move into content.

Preparing to facilitate a group session

Here are the steps you can take to dramatically improve how you work with groups and how groups work with you:

- Develop a written agenda and determine why you're holding this meeting. Write down the purpose and put it in the agenda for everyone to see.
- Decide how much time can be allotted to each part of the meeting.
- Develop questions that help the group focus their discussion.
- Become familiar enough with the issues to understand what's going on and the terms that are used.



- Review the meeting logistics well in advance of the meeting. Comfortable, spacious rooms are important. Refreshments should be continuously available for participants.

Activities, tasks and steps to include at the beginning of the session

Provided below are a few suggestions on starting the meeting. If participants feel good about why they're there, that their time is not going to be wasted, and that their opinions will be respected, then it will be easier helping them through the agenda.

- Post and discuss briefly the "ground rules." Handle issues like smoking, breaks, rest rooms, telephones, ETA (estimated time for adjournment), beepers and cell-phones at this time.
- Discuss the need to limit time spent on any one question. Let the group assist in setting the time boundaries for each discussion.
- Encourage equal participation and clear, concise participant statements.
- If people do not know each other, have them introduce themselves.
- Be very familiar with the driving questions before you start.

Activities, tasks and steps to take during the session

While facilitating the actual meeting, keep the following suggestions in mind:

- Ask specific questions to stimulate thought and discussion.
- Encourage alternative thinking.
- Take regular breaks.
- Keep track of time.
- Use data cards or flip charts to capture the information generated by the group and document the meeting results.



- Emphasize the common ground between opposing views. Remember that the process should build consensus. Build from the common to the disparate.
- Paraphrase and repeat key phrases from the group's discussion to keep them on track. Try to use the actual words that come from participants, but paraphrase when necessary.
- Attempt to organize the data along the way. Stop occasionally and ask the question, "Can anybody summarize what's been said so far? What have we decided?"
- Positive observations and evaluations should precede normative recommendations. For instance, "It seems like you're making progress. What should the group do in this instance?"
- Use the mildly conciliatory phrases to help organize and clarify. For instance: "While sympathetic to the concerns of the black hats, the group supports the view of the white hats."
- When there seems to be consensus, restate the understanding and ask if it is accurate.
- Try to look like you're having fun!
- Do not allow your personal opinions to enter into the group's discussion.

Activities, tasks and steps to take after the session

Once the formal meeting is over, the facilitator's job is still not done. Without tying up all the loose ends, the great results achieved by the participants in the meeting might dissolve.

Debrief with the other facilitators (or with your sponsor) immediately following a meeting to ensure capturing all subtle points.

- Finalize the documentation and prepare a written report highlighting what was decided.
- Plan to spend some time with the sponsor to give and gain feedback on the session.



Helpful hints to keep you out of trouble during the session

Here are a few more tips to make your job of meeting management a little easier:

- Be friendly, patient, sensitive... and thick-skinned to personal criticism directed toward you.
- Use humor to defuse confrontations.
- Find the experts in the group and draw on them as content sources when appropriate to the topic, but don't let the experts dominate the discussion.
- Don't be afraid to aggressively, but politely confront the group and individuals.
- Use silence and the "pregnant pause" to press the group when a difficult or sensitive issue is being discussed; this assists the group in taking responsibility and allows them to claim success for the final results of a meeting or discussion session.
- Solicit personal illustrations and stories to clarify points, where appropriate.
- Acknowledge contributions by repeating the point, when appropriate.
- Eye contact is important; it tells the participant, "I'm listening and care about what you're saying." Offer positive body language to demonstrate listening is occurring.
- Protect individual participants. Make conflict constructive and helpful to the group.
- Play "devil's advocate" when the group is coming to consensus too easily.
- Actively solicit help from the participants when a question is raised. For example: "Gee, Joe... I don't know. Can anyone here give Joe an answer to that question?"
- Trust the group and the meeting process you've designed. If they have the right information and sufficient time, they will do the "right" thing and make appropriate choices.



- Make individual participants feel valued.
- When facilitating the group remain neutral, frequently pause to give people time to think and reflect, ask subordinate, detailed questions to probe for more detail, encourage participation, and manage digression and dominance.
- Keep on time!
- Frequently ask the group, "Are we making progress? Will we be able to come to some level of agreement in the time we have available to us?"
- One of the facilitator's most important tools is playing dumb... acting stupid. (For some of us this is easier than for others!) "Hey, I don't know, but I bet someone here does," is a great way to get the group to assume responsibility for their work.
- Make certain everyone has an opportunity to participate and contribute to the discussion.
- When in doubt, ask the group's permission.

Don't let the twists and turns of meeting dynamics impede your group's progress, and remember that people in groups behave in predictable ways. As you gain experience you will begin to anticipate these behaviors. The more facilitation skills you acquire... the easier and more successful your meetings will be.