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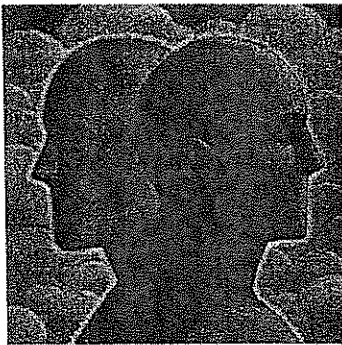
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May 7th, 2007 at 1:39 pm

Facilitation: Neutrality and why it matters

» by [clmyers](#) in: [Facilitation](#), [Family Conferencing](#), [Wraparound](#)



A word today about facilitator neutrality: what it is, what it isn't and why it's essential to program success. Many programs assume that a counselor or social worker is (or should be) prepared to facilitate team meetings. We beg to differ. Our facilitation model is based on the work first developed by [David Straus](#). Its emphasis is on facilitator neutrality and effective process design. One of the weaknesses (in my opinion) of many family conference and wraparound programs is their inclination to combine the role of the "Coordinator" with that of the "Facilitator".

For example, check out this sample from the book "[Theoretical Perspectives for Direct Social Work Practice: A Generalist-eclectic Approach](#)" by [Peter Lehmann](#) and [Nick Coady](#). They discuss the facilitation role (neutral convening of team meetings) in combination with the coordination role (working directly with children and families to assemble their teams and implement their plans).

What's the problem with this? A few things.

To get underneath it, we have to have a clear understanding of the distinction between CONTENT and PROCESS. The CONTENT is the "stuff" the family is working on and the topics the team talks about. The PROCESS is the way in which the team does its talking. Content = WHAT. Process = HOW. Anyone who is even peripherally involved in the CONTENT of a case is not, in fact, neutral to that content for two reasons: 1. They've engaged in directly working with that content and, 2. They are likely to be perceived by one or more team members as having a stake or an opinion.

Neutral facilitators enable teams to think deeply and creatively about issues where there are differences of agenda and opinion. They are able to help team members listen to one another and pull the wisdom from all points of view. From this comes a plan that everyone trusts as fair and sustainable. When the facilitator gets into the content s/he is at great risk of having his/her facilitation seen as "rigged" by one or more team members. When the team process is perceived as "rigged" (whether or not the perception is accurate), its integrity is compromised. Decisions made in meetings of questionable integrity are not as strong and not as likely to be sustained.

If at all possible, we advocate for having the coordinator and facilitator be separate people — and that the facilitator be someone that has no other connection to the family or team members. Sometimes limited resources seem to leave no option but to hire one person to do both roles. There are some tips and tricks that can help mitigate the problems with this. Forthcoming is a small but mighty series of posts on the aspects of facilitation that can make or break your family conference and wraparound teams.

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Role of the Facilitator

A neutral facilitator helps groups to organize and structure their decision-making process. The facilitator helps ensure that all voices are heard and ideas considered, and that meetings are productive and constructive. The facilitator will assist all participants to communicate clearly, to clarify issues, to explore options, and to reach consensus, whenever possible. The facilitator's job is to control the process, not the content. He or she does not render a judgment or influence any substantive decision, but rather helps participants come to their own decisions as a group.

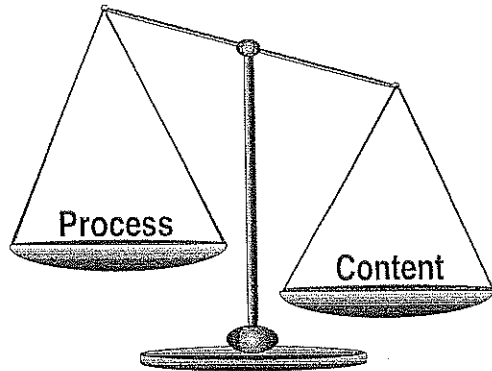
A facilitator is impartial and neutral. A facilitator must be unbiased and lack a preference favoring one or more of the participants. It does not mean that a facilitator must be without opinions, for that would be impossible. However, the facilitator must be aware of his or her own biases and put them aside so that bias does not influence the outcome of the dispute. It is a function of separating one's own opinions from the perspectives of the parties.

Neutrality refers to the relationship or behavior between the facilitator and the participants. Facilitators have neither had a relationship generally with the parties nor had a relationship that directly gave a benefit to any participant. Neutrality also means that the facilitator does not personally receive any benefit or gains from this facilitated process.

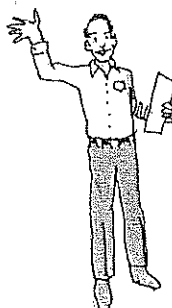


The facilitator is not a judge or arbitrator who make decisions for the parties. Likewise, the facilitator is not a lawyer or counselor who may give advice to the parties. The facilitator has no authority to influence the results decided upon by the participants. Instead, the facilitator helps the parties understand the nature of the dispute in a comfortable, relaxed setting so that they may fully consider options for the future. Other characteristics include:

- The facilitator opens communication channels.
- The facilitator creates an atmosphere for problem solving.
- The facilitator manages the process, not the content.
- The facilitator is a legitimizer who helps all parties recognize the rights of others to the dispute.
- The facilitator is a conduit through which trust can be built and through which negative communication can be channeled and reframed into more productive exchanges.
- The facilitator is a resource expander who provides procedural assistance to such experts as lawyers, counselors, technical experts, etc.
- The facilitator is a problem explorer who helps people look at the problem from many perspectives and assists them to identify options for resolution.
- The facilitator is a reality tester who helps the parties build reasonable, workable solutions that they can self-enforce.

Who Facilitates Agreement?



When more than 20% of the leader's attention is focused on the content, it's time for the leader to ask other members of the team to help keep the process focused and on track (or to call in a neutral facilitator).

Options	When To Use
 <p>The Leader (accountable for the results)</p>	<p>Most informational meetings (staff meetings, project update meetings) where the primary purpose is to exchange information and update team members.</p> <p>Other types of meetings (planning or problem-solving) where the leader is <i>not</i> the primary source of expertise and is <i>not</i> vested in arriving at a particular outcome or decision.</p>
 <p>Team Members (assist in part or lead whole meeting)</p>	<p>Meetings where the leader has a strong vested interest in the outcome and wants to focus on the content, and another team member has the necessary facilitation skills.</p> <p>Meetings where the leader may have to respond to many questions and/or many issues could be raised, preventing him or her from being able to focus on both content <i>and</i> process.</p>
 <p>Neutral Facilitator (not accountable for the results)</p>	<p>Meetings where all members of the team, including the leader, want to focus mostly on the content and/or have a high stake in the outcome.</p>

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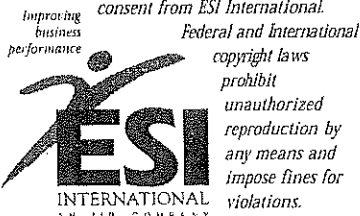
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Essential Facilitation Skills for Successful Project Managers

By Denise DeCarlo, PMP

I wish I had known how critical good facilitation skills are to the project management process when I started my project management career. This knowledge would have saved me a lot of frustration, time and embarrassment with my various project stakeholders. In this article, we'll discuss one of the best ways to conduct a facilitated workshop.

Excellent facilitation skills are essential for the project management toolkit. Following are 10 steps that you, as the project manager, can take to prepare for a facilitated meeting and ensure you achieve the intended results.

Recognize the Need for a Facilitated Meeting

All too often, we simply schedule a meeting without thinking about what type of meeting we, as project managers, need to have. In some situations, a facilitated meeting is necessary to ensure we obtain the desired results. Typical situations that warrant a facilitated meeting include:

- Brainstorming
- Root cause analysis
- Problem solving
- Obtaining stakeholder buy-in
- Project Kickoff
- Developing product alternatives
- Lessons learned

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Executive Session

The Role of the Executive in Portfolio Management

By Gerard M. Hill, PMP

The Executive Session is written by executives specifically for executives and the managers who report directly to them.

Complementing our more functional articles, this column focuses on the larger issues facing executives who are responsible for implementing project management within their organizations.

This month's column, written by project management expert Gerard M. Hill, PMP, discusses the role of the executive in managing the project portfolio.

Depending on organization size and structure, the role of the project executive may be fulfilled by the president or CEO, the chief financial officer (budget director), the chief technology officer, business area vice presidents or business unit directors. Project executives, often convened as a senior management team, serve as the guiding force in developing and implementing an effective portfolio management capability. They oversee the portfolio management process and make go/no-go decisions about the business mix, scope, resource allocations and continuation of projects at specified intervals. In some instances, in smaller organizations or in business units, a single executive or senior

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Consider a Neutral Facilitator

The neutral facilitator is often a peer or someone else not on your current project team. A neutral facilitator allows you to participate in the meeting with other project stakeholders and not have your biases sway those participants. Also, the participants are likely to speak more freely with a neutral facilitator.

Prepare For the Meeting

As the meeting initiator, you should have a clear idea of the objective of the meeting, the desired outcome, the duration of the meeting and anticipated areas of conflict. You need to provide this information to your facilitator. This detailed information will better prepare him or her for the terminology and types of issues that may surface during the meeting. You should also send out an agenda before the meeting so all the participants know what to expect and can prepare for the meeting themselves.

Invite Correct Attendees

Be sure to invite the right people. If a specific person or department is required, make sure they can attend. Reschedule the meeting if key personnel are not able to participate. Also, avoid inviting excess personnel. An ideal number of attendees is five to 20. Groups of more than 20 can be very difficult to manage effectively.

Meet at a Neutral Location

A neutral location may be a conference room not located near anyone's office or, if the budget allows, an off-site corporate conference room at a hotel. Neutral locations avoid shifts in the "power of control" that might occur if a meeting is held in a particular department's "turf."

Ensure the Meeting Room Has the Right Equipment

Ideal meeting rooms will contain flip chart paper, markers, post-it@notes, whiteboards with dry erase markers, plenty of table space and enough room based on the number of attendees so people don't feel crowded. Nothing kills productivity like feeling uncomfortable.

Prepare to Handle Problems During the Meeting

Some attendees will want to grandstand and run the show. Others may attempt to sway people to believe their ideas are the best. A good facilitator is trained in how to set aside items that are not germane to the topic at hand. This person should also be able to stop participants and tell them politely that their idea has been noted and now it's time to hear another viewpoint. The facilitator must be able to do this to a senior-level person as well as to his or her peers.

The facilitator may need to use nonverbal techniques, like writing ideas on post-it@ notes, to obtain anonymous input from all participants, especially for sensitive or political issues. He or she should also ask open-ended and more targeted questions, as appropriate, to control the flow and dialog of the meeting.

A good facilitator can make or break the effectiveness of a meeting. If your organization does not have good facilitators available, consider hiring a consultant to facilitate meetings or provide training for project managers in the organization to improve their facilitation skills.

Inform Participants of the Purpose of the Meeting

It's not enough that *you* know the purpose of a meeting. For the meeting to be completely effective, everyone involved must have a good idea of its purpose. It's also good to have a specific agenda with a timeline, if possible.

Schedule time in the agenda for a brief icebreaker at the beginning of the meeting. This helps to build camaraderie which may ease tense moments that sometimes arise during heated debate.

Record the Meeting

Choose someone who will not be participating in the session to document the meeting. Since we all have different memory patterns, the documentation will provide an important, detailed synopsis of the meeting for review later.

This "scribe" will also record specific action items, with the owner's name and the desired completion or follow-up date. It will be the responsibility of the facilitator to ensure the person assigned to record the meeting obtains this information.

Establish Ground Rules

Finally, for the best meeting results, establish ground rules and enforce them. Typical ground rules cover:

- Start and end time of the session
- Frequency and duration of breaks
- On-time return from breaks
- Attendance at the entire meeting
- Turning cell phones, pagers and PDAs off or on vibrate
- Having one conversation at a time
- Sharing ideas
- Asking questions liberally
- Not judging ideas as bad
- Having fun! (Provide snacks or something to make this meeting different from typical meetings.)

As project managers, we hold meetings all the time, and sometimes they need to be facilitated. The next time you're preparing for a meeting, ask yourself if this is an appropriate time for a facilitated meeting. A well-managed facilitated meeting may be your best bet to ensure that you use participant time effectively.

Denise DeCarlo is a senior instructor for ESI and is President of Mindavation, a company that provides project management training and IT consulting, leadership workshops and team-building programs worldwide. DeCarlo can be reached at Mindavation at www.mindavation.com or by calling 866-888-MIND (6463).

