

Facilitation ... A Much Needed Skill

Issue July 2011

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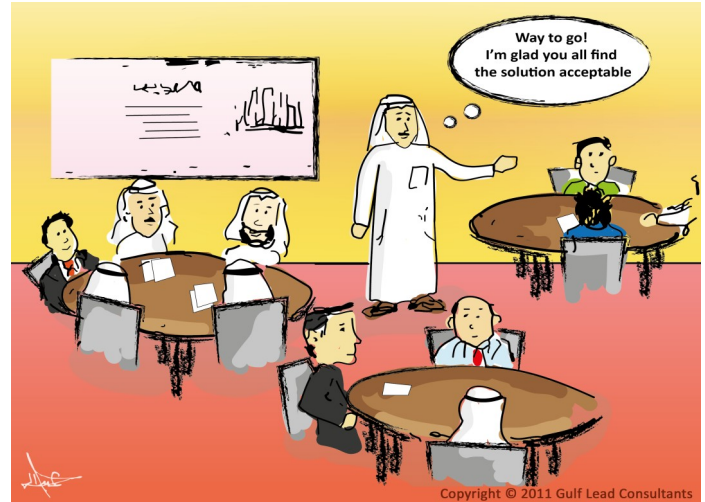
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When a group of individuals hold a workshop meeting for a specific objective, the underlying premise is that the collective simultaneous effort of participants shall produce a result that exceeds independent or non-simultaneous efforts of the individuals. In reality, however, this premise is often violated. Many workshop meetings suffer from two kinds of illnesses; *inefficiency*, where time is wasted over nonproductive activities and futile arguments; and *ineffectiveness*, where the results fall short of the preset objective. According to Burke et al.:

*"One misconception about meetings is that getting all the experts in the same room will automatically produce good results. In actuality, getting the experts together is just the beginning, the beginning of being able to work together effectively."*¹

The first author wrote an article on conducting a successful work improvement workshop; where one of the mentioned success factors is the choice of facilitator². In this article, we focus exclusively on facilitation, where our purpose is twofold; first, report on the latest and commonly accepted good practices of facilitation; and second, reflect on our experience of the most important factors/drivers of workshop meeting success.

Selected Facilitation Vocabulary

Facilitation comes from the Latin *facilitar* meaning "to make easy." Achieving objectives and results from a pool of experts meeting is not a straight forward task and will not happen automatically, a good facilitator is needed to manage the workshop meeting effectively and efficiently. Facilitation can be defined through a set of "do and don't" activities/roles expected of the facilitator:

- Guide ... not lead.
- Enable ... not lecture.
- Create thinking space ... not solve.
- Engage ... not direct.

- Challenge ... not frustrate.
- Support ... not do others work.

The following are definitions of selected vocabulary from Ingrid Bens².

- **Facilitator:** "A helper and enabler whose goal is to support others to achieve exceptional performance."
- **Intervention:** "Any action or set of actions that aim to improve how a group functions."
- **Plenary:** "A large group session held to share the ideas developed in separate subgroups." Plenary sessions become necessary when the group size is too big and/or the task is too complex to be handled by a small group.
- **Norms:** "A set of rules of conduct created by group members with which they mutually agree to govern themselves."

The facilitation process may be divided into three stages; *initiation*, *conduct*, and *closure*; where each stage involves a number of activities identified by Ingrid² as shown in Figure 1. The next three sections detail each stage.

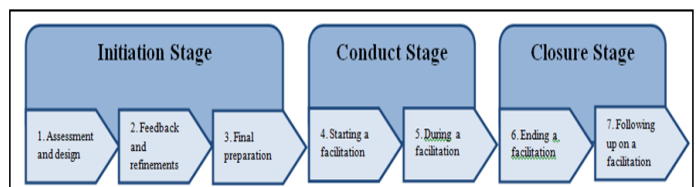


Figure (1): Stages of Facilitation.

The Initiation Stage

The facilitator gathers information from the person who has asked to conduct the workshop meeting as well as from the meeting participants. S/He then **assesses** the information and subsequently proceeds to **design** the draft agenda; which typically consists of the workshop meeting objective and main activities.

The facilitator sends the draft agenda to participants for **feedback and refinement**. If needed, a preparation meeting could be held to solicit participants feedback. During this meeting, the facilitator should listen to the participants' views and objections and clarifies his/her draft agenda design. The outcome is a final approved agenda design.

The facilitator then performs **final preparation** that focuses mainly on logistic matters; e.g. invitations, venue and food, facilitation material, confirmation of attendance, and availability of equipment/tools. A key item in facilitation preparation is the seating arrangement as it has a significant impact on participants' interaction and discussion. The worst seating arrangement is the theatre-style as it averts people from looking at each other; whereas, the best seating arrangement is small round tables which ideally should consist of no more than five to eight participants assigned to each table².

Miller provides the following tips at this stage³:

1. Prepare a 'relaxed' agenda to allow adequate time for thinking, discussing, reflecting, etc.
2. Allow a 20 minute minimum break between sessions for participants to reenergize and for facilitator to setup.
3. The facilitator should pre-play the session activities in his mind identifying potential oversights and bugs.
4. Respect the rule of thumb that the attention and interest drops off after the 10th slide; so allow for a real interactive activity after the 10th slide.

Sanders corroborates with some of Miller's tips and provides an additional tip related to the professionalism and personal qualities of the facilitator⁴; where a professional facilitator is one who should be credible, objective, experienced with the facilitation process and skills, and preferably with no attachment to outcomes. The latter recommendation would generally favor an external facilitator.

Most of the facilitation skills mentioned by Sanders are rather personal qualities; they include: friendliness, sensitivity, focus, firmness, non-judgmental, commitment to results, knowledge of group dynamics, and awareness of time parameters. Another skill relates to the handling of side-talking, where Sanders eloquently suggests "*walking over and standing next to the distracted offenders. Be a little more direct with repeat offenders - remind the group (not the offender specifically) that they have a lot to accomplish in little time and they need everyone's attention and contribution in order to get the best results.*"⁴ Yet another important skill relate to the facilitator's ability to build consensus among differing views by finding a compromising proposal that gains the acceptance and support of all participants.

The Conduct Stage

The facilitator should always arrive first in order to insure that the room set-up is as planned and to make last-minute modifications, if necessary, arrange the facilitation material, and test the equipment (e.g. laptop, projector, etc.).

The facilitator **starts the facilitation** meeting introducing oneself and clarifying the roles and responsibilities as well as the norms.

During facilitation, the facilitator should keep the discussion on track. Ingrid proposes the Three P's of Process checking²:

- *Pace* the session rate; not too slow or too fast.
- *Process*, where the adopted approach is appropriate.
- *Pulse*, where participants energy is adequate.

The fundamentals of meeting management according to Ingrid are²:

1. *Meeting agenda*. The agenda should include time and location of the meeting, the discussion items, the responsible party for each item, and the process to be used for each item. Also, it is advised to assign a time for each discussion item.
2. *Process notes*. For every agenda item, process notes should be developed to detail how the discussion will be facilitated by identifying the tools and techniques that will be used. The process notes can be kept by the facilitator or shared with all participants.
3. *Roles and responsibilities*. The following roles should be defined.
 - a. *Facilitator*. A neutral expert that leads the participation discussion.
 - b. *Chairperson*. The chairperson is usually not neutral and can express his/her opinion. The chairperson ensures that the meeting is run according to the set meeting norms.
 - c. *Minute taker*. Responsible for taking notes of the discussion and the decisions.
 - d. *Timekeeper*. Responsible for keeping track of the time of the discussion items as agreed in the agenda. This role can be rotated among the participants during the meeting. A good practice is to use a timer to allow the timekeeper to participate freely during the discussion.
 - e. *Scribe*. Responsible for recording notes on a flipchart or a board to free the facilitator although it is advisable that the facilitator records his/her own notes. The scribe should not interact with the participants; any questions and/or clarification should be channeled through the facilitator.
4. *Meeting norms/ground rules*. The norms should cater to the participants' comfort and expression of their ideas. Also, the norms should state how the decisions will be made during the meeting. The norms should be written and preferably posted on the wall. They can be specific and customized to the participants or the meeting needs. Some of the common norms or rules are: attending meetings on time, respecting different opinions, listening to each other, and turning off all cell phones.
5. *Participation management*. The facilitator is responsible for breaking the ice among participants and ensuring that everyone is active and participating. The facilitator should prevent few participants from dominating the discussion.
6. *Periodic check of the process*. The facilitator should have a periodic process check using the above mentioned Three P's of Process Checking; this should be done periodically in consultation with the participants.

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7. *Determining the next steps.* At the end of the meeting, an action plan should be agreed on. The action plan includes the actions, the responsible party, and completion time.
8. *Evaluating the meeting.* Using a single-page evaluation sheet, the participants should evaluate the meeting and state what can be done to improve subsequent meetings. Additionally, the facilitator should request immediate verbal feedback at the conclusion of the workshop meeting, and should humbly accept them for next time improvement.

Miller provides the following tips at this stage³ :

1. Control use of jargon and provide a board area for explaining jargons to avoid inferiority feel by other group members. This is especially important when participants belong to different background.
2. Make lists of the group thoughts to give a sense of order and progress; and for later use and reference.
3. Make sure that agreements are written and presented to ensure closure.
4. Put body language into good use. Body language toolbox includes voice tone, pauses, silence durations, arm and head postures, and face expressions. At times, it may be useful not to exhibit positive body language.
5. Speak less and listen more.

One of the challenges is to get everyone participating and prevent minority dominance of the discussion. Some tips in that regard include⁵:

1. Watch yourself from becoming the one doing most of the talking!
2. Commend and encourage individual views and comments.
3. Don't criticize a view.
4. Record all views on a flipchart.
5. Relate comments of various participants to promote concurrence among participants.
6. On important matters, ask each participant to give opinion.

With regard to the 4th tip, the authors have found typing views directly on a word document and showing them to participants through a data show is both effective and efficient. But this requires that the scribe be professional at typing.

The Closure Stage

Ending a facilitation is important to ensure that the decisions are made and a detailed action plan is developed and the follow-up process is clarified. **Following up** on action plan progress may take several forms, as appropriate; e.g. hold one or more follow-up meeting, use a follow-up questionnaire, and pay personal visits to participants. At this stage, the participants are held accountable to implement the tasks in the action plan. The facilitator responsibility will be restricted to reminding responsible persons and may provide them with a template to report the implementation progress and/or other responsibilities as agreed.

Active and prompt follow-up would ensure that people's time is not wasted in the workshop meeting; and should there be a subsequent workshop meeting, follow-up becomes a critical prerequisite for that meeting success.

Our Experience

The article has so far emphasized many important aspects that should be considered to realize a successful outcome of workshop meetings. From our experience, the two remaining aspects which we believe stand out among all other aspects are the *organization culture* and *attitude of participants*.

As Davis and Droppers noted: "*most organizations aren't comfortable with open disagreement, which is why people feel that they can't speak freely.*"⁶ The facilitator should secure top management commitment to free thinking and encouragement of people to voice their opinion without the bias of top management views. This requires that top management participating in workshops follow a policy of restraint; allowing others to speak first, welcoming differing opinions, and when possible, demonstrating tolerance by changing their own views in favor of other participants' views.

Without participants coming to the workshop meeting with the 'right' attitude, facilitators will face a daunting uphill losing battle! Therefore, we strongly recommend that participants be educated on the *healthy attitude in meetings*. The first session of the workshop meeting could be dedicated for that purpose, or preferably, a separate session could be held prior to the workshop meeting.

The objective is to motivate and engage participants so they may develop a *pro-change* mindset; where they are *coached* that

- change of opinion and amenability are qualities of great individuals; and that
- great ideas emerge from astutely listening and contriving solutions that are born of adapting others' views.

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