



# EFFECTIVE FACILITATION

## *oiling the wheels of change*

If there is a problem to be solved or a decision to be made which needs buy-in from a number of people then an independent facilitator can guide the group through to a successful outcome in a way that the owner of the problem often cannot. The chairman of a meeting will generally have their own idea of what the end result should be – an independent facilitator will ensure that everyone has their say and that the end result is reached in an impartial manner.

When facilitation works well it is invisible!



## The Role of Facilitator

The facilitator provides a structure within which objectives are achieved and an environment within which work can get done. Each participant is encouraged to take the opportunity to contribute and by *pulling* information from attendees (rather than *pushing* them to accept a specific point of view), the facilitator can enable suggestions to be built upon in order to reach an optimum position.

There are two main aspects to the role of facilitator: to manage the practicalities of running the session, and to ensure progress is made and a satisfactory end point reached.

## Practicalities

Thorough preparation before a session is of the utmost importance.

- Make sure you clearly understand the context for the session and be aware of any organisational or cultural issues.
- Agree the objectives with the session owner.

It is a good idea to restrict the number of people attending a facilitated session to between eight and twelve.

- If this is not possible, consider having two facilitators to manage the group.

Remember to invite everyone who needs to be there – this may include business or technical subject matter experts.

Send out the objectives for the session with the agenda when inviting the participants.

Consider how best to arrange the room for the session. If the layout is fixed, then take time to understand how this might affect the dynamics of the session.

- Find out about the attendees beforehand so that you can use a seating plan effectively to ensure that quiet people are fully engaged and the potential for disruptive behaviours is minimised.
- Try to ensure that there will not be any interruptions or at least decide how to deal with them should they occur.

Ensure that you have all the materials that you need for the particular session (for presentation, handouts, wall displays) and that you are familiar with the workings of any audio visual equipment to be used.

Wear comfortable clothing that is appropriate to the session. This could be casual or smart but needs to be practical for ease of movement and with no obtrusive or noisy accessories.

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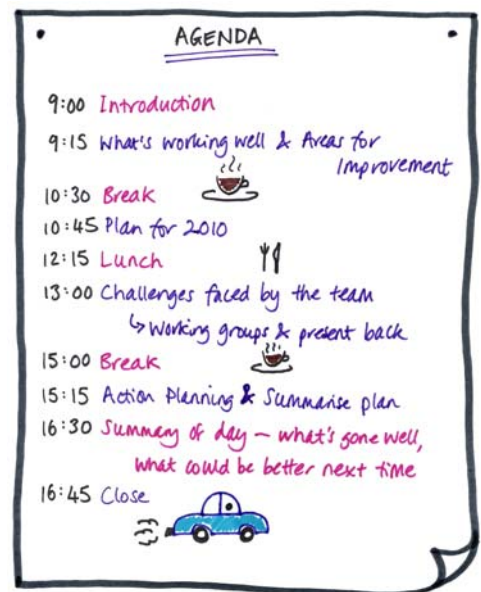
Take your own 'facilitator's kit' containing flip chart pens, white board pens, spare pencils/pens for delegates, blu tack, masking tape, post-its, stickers, scissors, stapler, clock and, if it's going to be a long session, some sweets!

- The sweets will help to maintain sugar levels and therefore boost concentration.

Ensure that your facilitator's kit contains the right equipment for the current session – plus any other eventualities.

A few tips for using flip charts:

- make up any key flip charts in advance
- give each one a title
- when capturing 'live', write what is said or, if you have to, summarise and get permission to use revised wording
- limit to about 12 lines of text per sheet
- use abbreviations sparingly
- print clearly using dark pens
- use colour intentionally to highlight or differentiate
- alternate colours between notes for ease of reading
- use pictures or symbols to add interest
- stand by the flip chart so people can see what's written



## Method and Mechanisms

Start the session by explaining the scope of the facilitator's role and the process that will be followed. This will help to establish expectations and make the group feel comfortable.

Introduce ground rules for the session and get the group's agreement to apply them. Ground rules might include

- everyone having an equal voice
- being succinct when speaking and getting to the point as quickly as possible
- not re-visiting the past
- having a 'car park' where open issues and questions can be recorded to be dealt with elsewhere
- turning mobile phones off (or at least to silent mode!)

Keep the session on course by referring regularly to the objectives.

Maintain the focus and momentum by using different techniques with different pace. (see *Knowledge Bank 'Engagement and Participation'* for some ideas)

Ensure adequate breaks are scheduled and taken while managing the overall schedule to ensure everything is covered and you finish on time. You should plan for a ten minute break after each 40 minute section.



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If the session is going off-course, call a break and check back with the chairman, explaining the options and their consequences. This can sometimes be a useful diversionary tactic.

Review the car park and action list at the end. All actions must have an owner and a date.

Don't forget to clarify what will happen after the session has finished.

### An Effective Facilitator

- is tolerant, and remains ego-less and non-defensive
- has integrity, respecting each individual's contribution
- maintains a high energy level with a relentless commitment to getting results, confronting issues as they arise
- needs to be open to 'vibes' and flexible enough to 'go with the flow' while keeping focus on the end objective
- thinks on their feet and flexes the agenda depending on progress on the day
- empathises with the group, being aware of body language, tone of voice, lack of participation and non-vocal verbalisation
- is familiar with the how to deal with different behaviours
- can call upon a number of learned skills:
  - purposeful and relevant questioning
  - active listening
  - eliciting, giving and acting on feedback
  - summarising
  - presentation and use of voice
- above all, retains a sense of humour and perspective



*In our experience...*

*Conflict is inevitable, but dealing with it in the here and now can be highly productive – if you confront the problem not the person, you can transform the hostile energy into something more positive*

*You need to be aware of 'group think' - it's a good idea to sanity check and ask obvious questions, prompting a critical review of decisions*