

Facilitation Skills

Facilitating a meeting or training session involves an important set of tasks and skills to ensure an effective meeting or training outcome. Experienced facilitators know that facilitation is both a skill and an art. Techniques can be learned and improved with practice. Then there are some that just have a knack for it.

What does facilitation look like? Contrary to what you might think, the facilitator is not the seat of wisdom and knowledge of the group. The facilitator doesn't give opinions. The facilitator:

1. Guides the group through a process to draw out opinions and ideas of the group members,
2. Is neutral and never takes sides,
3. Focuses on how people participate in the process of planning or learning as well as what is achieved.

Facilitating means:

- To understand the goals of the meeting.
- To keep the group on the agenda moving forward.
- Involving everyone.
- Ensure democratic decision making.



Now that we have a high level look at what a facilitator does, let's look a little closer at the process and personal skills.

Process Skills

The process skills begin with up front planning. These involve paying attention to the logistics and ground rules.

A few words about logistics. Give some thought to where your participants will feel most comfortable and willing to participate. Do they have to travel? When they arrive will they find a cramped, cold, room or a room that is laid out to encourage discussion and creativity with a comfortable temperature. Is there appropriate wall space to hang flipcharts? How about audio visual equipment? Refreshments? You can probably think of more items to consider.

Spend time developing ground rules. These are the norms within which the participants will operate while attending. If your organization already has operating rules, great! If not, consider rules such as one person speaks at a time, be respectful, come back from breaks on time, etc.

During the meeting the process can be summarized as follows:

1. Start the meeting on time
2. Welcome the group
3. Make time for introductions
4. Review the agenda, objectives, and rules
5. Encourage participation
6. Keep to the agenda
7. Seek commitments
8. Bring each item to closure
9. Respect everyone
10. Be flexible
11. Summarize the results and follow-ups
12. Thank the participants
13. Close the meeting

Use your creativity when addressing these thirteen points. For instance, introductions do not always have to be going around the room in order having each individual introducing oneself. Try giving a few moments for the participants to get to know the individual sitting next to them and introduce each other.

Personal Skills

1. Do not memorize a script. Know the agenda well, along with the key points, but be flexible.
2. Tune in to your group. Do they look tired, confused, restless? Be ready to take action on what ails the group.
3. Check back with the group. After each major point, summarize and ask for questions.
4. Tune in to yourself. Your actions affect the participants. Do you feel you are losing control? Call a break.
5. Don't fiddle with those hands. Do not play with pens/pencils/change in the pocket, etc. If you must, hold on to the back of a chair.
6. Be careful how you say it. Stay away from swear words, or words that could alienate or offend.
7. Use your body language. Have a shy participant? Move closer to the individual to ask for his/her opinion. Walk around the room.
8. Don't talk to the walls. If writing on the board or flipchart, write, and turn back to the group to talk.

Putting the process and personal facilitation steps in place will help ensure that the session runs smoothly, outcomes are reached, and participants leave feeling positive about the session's accomplishments.