

WHAT IS A GROUP FACILITATOR?

Compiled by Sandor Schuman [Selected definitions listed here]

Facilitation is about process - *how you do something* - rather than the content - *what you do*. A facilitator is a process guide, someone who makes a process easier or more convenient. Facilitation is about *movement* moving something from A to B. The facilitator guides the group toward a *destination*. Facilitation makes it easier to get to an agreed destination.

Dale Hunter, Anne Bailey, and Bill Taylor
The Art of Facilitation: How to Create Group Synergy
Fisher Books, 1995, page 1

A facilitator is someone who uses knowledge of group processes to formulate and deliver the needed structure for meeting interactions to be effective. The facilitator focuses on effective processes (meeting dynamics) allowing the participants to focus on the content or the substance of their work together.

IAF Basic Facilitation Primer, May 2002

The primary role of a facilitator is to assist parties to have a constructive dialogue. Facilitators usually help groups set an agenda and manage the process of discussion. ... For example, facilitators help the parties to recognize how their own styles of interacting or the institutional prejudices that they embody may interfere with constructive problem solving. Here the objective is to promote understanding among the parties. Additionally, facilitators may propose a series of process steps to keep the discussion on target. Facilitators may also explicitly help parties find a mutually agreeable solution to a dispute.

Barbara Gray
Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems
Jossey-Bass, 1989, page 163.

The facilitator's role ... is to lead the group in drawing out answers, building a vision and developing plans that motivate everybody to achieve agreed upon goals - in short, to win. The more input the manager [facilitator] collects and channels, the more creativity is released. The facilitator functions much like the conductor of a symphony, orchestrating and bringing forth the talents and contributions of others. The facilitator is also a communicator. Working with decentralized structures such as networks, small teams and cross-departmental task forces ... the facilitator fosters communication and understanding between the units.

Laura Spencer
Winning Through Participation:
Meeting the Challenge of Corporate Change with the Technology of Participation
Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1989, page 12.



FACILITATION, TRAINING, CONSULTATION OR DO IT YOURSELF?

By Jon Jenkins

A lot of confusion exists about the terms facilitation, training and consulting. As someone who does all three, I would like to help you understand how to keep them separate. I think the distinction is important and to understand what they are called is also important if for no other reason than that, as a manager, you know what you are buying.

I also think it is important to think of training, facilitation and consulting in two ways - what the professional intends with his or her intervention and what methods are used in the intervention. The key distinction is the intent, not the methods. The fact that similar methods are used with very different intents by trainers, consultants and facilitators is a strong point of confusion. Another way to look at this is what end product you are buying and what process is used to deliver that product.

TRAINING

When do I send someone to training programs? When I want to have a competency, knowledge, skill or attitude that is not present or insufficiently present in the company. While there are many ways of gaining that competency or whatever, a relatively efficient way is through training. Training methodologies run from monologues (without questions and answers) to interactive, participative, learning teams and yet the goal remains the same, changes in behaviour.

Because people have different learning styles, creating a training program that meets all of these styles in some optimal way is difficult. Good training leans more and more toward providing the exact skills, etc. in the actual working situation of the client's specific location. For these reasons and others, training is becoming increasingly interactive and participative.

CONSULTING

When do I want to hire a consultant? When I want to use a competency, skill, knowledge, or attitude and I don't want to have it available internally in my company. When I hire a doctor or lawyer I am hiring a consultant. Again the consultant's methods run from contract, diagnosis, cure, and payment to very participative and interactive research, development and implementation processes. Frankly, I prefer the lawyer and doctor who solves the problem with minimal effort on my part, and the same might be true of a preferred consultant. Others might prefer both more participation in their own health care or in their own business solutions.

I believe the best consulting tends to be more participative using the client's knowledge about their local situation and the consultant's knowledge of methods and models in combination to create an implemented solution.

FACILITATION

When do I want to hire a facilitator? When I want a group planning, model-building, team building, or decision-making process to be managed by someone outside the group. I want the facilitator to have skills in group processes and be neutral about the content of the discussion. The two reasons for hiring a facilitator are:

1. Complex or difficult group dynamics have made meetings dysfunctional.
2. A person without vested interest in the outcome needs to lead the meeting.

The methodologies used by facilitators are interactive and participatory, involving those attending the meeting in creating a solution to a problem or creating a plan. They assume that the participants have the authority and ability to deal with the problem or develop the plan.

DO IT YOURSELF (DIY)

As with converting the attic into a spare bedroom, you can hire a contractor or you can do it yourself. Three questions need to be answered "yes" for effective DIY. Do you have the skills necessary to do the job? Is it more cost effective for you to do it than to hire the job out? Do you have the time to do the job?

If you answer "no" to any of the above questions, then you might consider putting off the project or hiring a contractor, and the same holds true for hiring a trainer, a consultant or a facilitator.

