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Beyond Techniques: The Art of Facilitation

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BEYOND TECHNIQUES – THE "ART" OF FACILITATION

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This article is not designed to be a fully comprehensive or even particularly academic discussion of the issues of Facilitation. Those sorts of things abound in textbooks everywhere. Rather, what I hope to do is to share with the reader some of my personal thoughts on the subject, based on many years of often "painful" experience.

There are a lot of different kinds of teams that have to be facilitated from time to time. The teams we are addressing here are Multi-discipline teams. And they do have their unique "opportunities" for the facilitator! With these teams you often run into turf protection, multiple bosses, and multiple layers, just to mention a few. Add to that the unique "personalities" of the disciplines and meetings can quickly grow interesting.

Here are some of my personal "Rules of the Road" for such circumstances:

No team anywhere will succeed without A PURPOSE AND A CHARTER! As the Facilitator, YOU must secure one.

It would be wonderful if managers would provide these things when they launch a team, but the truth of the matter is that they seldom do. So be prepared to request one of the chartering manager, and be persistent in insisting that this is a real requirement.

The team has to be "BUILT" — it won't just "evolve"! As the Facilitator, YOU must lead this!

Even for a very short process of, say, a month of meetings, you still must take the time to help the group get acquainted, state expectations, and clarify ground rules. More lengthy processes — several months to a year — may require as much as a two-day team building session. Now, don't panic! Such a session can generally be conducted by a training resource person. But it is your job to recognize that all teams need to come together first and to insure that a sound process is in place for this to occur.

Every session must have a GAMEPLAN – objectives, structure, clarity! As the Facilitator, YOU must prepare this!

Outcomes, agendas, etc. — all that stuff really is important. It matters less exactly *how* you do it than that it gets done! These groups will not be patient when they feel their time is being wasted, and yes, they will blame you.

Two things are always happening — the PROCESS and the CONTENT! As the Facilitator, YOU must monitor both the music and the words!

Have you ever noticed your stomach begin to tighten up in a meeting? Well, trust your stomach. It is sending you a message that the process (music) isn't going well, whether the words "sound" right or not. You have to do something about that because the chances are that everyone else feels the same discomfort, but they are waiting on you to address it. That's called an "intervention" and the most simple one I can suggest is to call "Time Out". Then just simply state that things aren't feeling quite right — how are others feeling at the moment about the work of the group? Sounds a bit awkward (and it can be at first), but don't quit. Soon

you will not only learn how, but will have developed your own way of doing it. It will prompt the team to regroup and hopefully move forward more successfully.

Participation must be LIVELY, SPONTANEOUS, and WIDESPREAD! As the Facilitator, YOU must achieve this!

You can't just hope that your meeting agenda will take care of this particular issue. Instead, be prepared with your own little toolbox of quick techniques. For example, if one or two people tend to dominate, structure discussion to go around the table, giving everyone a minute first to collect their thoughts and prepare what they want to say. Or if someone insists on talking about something off-topic, create a "bin list" on the flipchart and write their issue down; then set up a point when the group will address it, and see if you can't get that person willingly back on track. Those are but two of my standard "tools". Think creatively, read, ask trainers, and soon you will have a good list of your own.

Conflicts and confrontation can be either GOOD or BAD! As the Facilitator, YOU must help achieve the creative ends!

Nobody is crazy about meetings where arguments break out, or those where people just shut up and go underground with their feelings. As a Facilitator, you must overcome your own discomfort with this situation and help the group to do the same. I use the flipchart a LOT at times like this. Get everyone to give an idea, then write it on the chart. Then they can disagree with the chart, NOT with the person who gave the idea. Sounds a bit crazy, but it often helps.

Every team has trouble spots! As the Facilitator, YOU must overcome the hurdles!

Often the best resource is the group itself — or sometimes you may want to ask for help from trainers and others. But most importantly, I find that few problems really just take care of themselves and that the best way to get them unearthed is to hold a sort of "Midpoint Critique". At the end of a session — or in the middle of a long session — call for a critique. Again, a simple approach is to present the team with a 1-to-10 scale on the flipchart and to ask each person to comment — that's more than giving a number! It can really start the ball rolling.

Every team has the potential for SYNERGY and SUCCESS! As the Facilitator, YOU must strike the chord!

No, I'm not talking about magic here. But I do think the group will pick up on your cues. If you are enthusiastic, determined, task-focused, and really DEMONSTRATE that by your behavior, then they will pick up on it. It is not all that uncommon for a group to keep at a task that they find discouraging at the moment out of commitment to helping you. Work to build their commitment to the task, but run with that personal energy for awhile if it helps. And always take the time to celebrate small victories of the group — work really *can* be fun, you know!

There are also a few DON'T DO's as well:

The team needs LEADERSHIP! As the Facilitator, you are NOT the boss!
Enough said!

The ANSWERS lie within the team! As the Facilitator, you are NOT the sole decision-maker!

When the group is moving along, let it and don't get too involved yourself. Now, that can be a problem if you are also a team member. In that case, be careful not to dominate, and, if necessary, refer to wearing your "team member hat" as opposed to your "facilitator hat".

Each team member has RESPONSIBILITY! As the Facilitator, it's not yours alone!

Don't let all the preceding Rules of the Road lead you to assume that I think the Facilitator is alone in these Rules. Rather, you are the model and coach who must insure that these things get done. You want to get the team understanding that they too share in the responsibility for success. A good way to begin to set the stage for this right from the beginning is in the team-building session. Another point: sometimes the team has to struggle a bit in order to recognize and take up its responsibility. If you are always too quick to the rescue, an unhealthy dependency can develop.

These are not necessarily the most comprehensive listing of "Rules" for facilitation. They are, however, the things that stand out to me as critical issues. You won't master them all at once, so be patient with yourself. And use resources to help you — other facilitators and trainers can be excellent sounding boards.