

THE ROLE OF FACILITATOR

by Sam Kaner, Ph.D. and Duane Berger, M.S.

WHAT IS A FACILITATOR AND WHY HAVE ONE?

The facilitator's job is to support everyone to do their best thinking. To do this, the facilitator encourages full participation, promotes mutual understanding and cultivates shared responsibility. By supporting everyone to do their best thinking, a facilitator enables group members to search for inclusive solutions and build sustainable agreements.

How much value does this have to a group? The answer depends on the group's goals. Suppose a group holds meetings specifically for the purpose of trading information through announcements and reports. Do the members of that group need much help to do their best thinking? Not really. Likewise, suppose another group has monthly business-as-usual meetings to make routine decisions about standard problems, like task assignments or scheduling. Those kinds of issues could be handled for years without any facilitation whatsoever.

But what about more difficult challenges? For example, suppose a group's goal is to reduce violence on a high school campus. The participants are parents, teachers, administrators, church leaders and union officials. This group will quickly find out how difficult it is to conduct a sustained, thoughtful discussion. Despite a common goal, their frames of reference are very different. What seems to a parent like an obvious solution may seem simple-minded to an administrator. What seems reasonable to an administrator may seem cowardly to a teacher. What seems responsible to a teacher may place too many demands on a parent.

Groups face difficult challenges all the time. Long-term planning is hard for an organization to do well. So is restructuring or re-engineering. Here are some other tough issues groups face: clarifying roles and responsibilities for projects that have not been done before; resolving high-stakes conflicts; introducing new technology into a workplace. In situations like these, a group is likely to make wiser, more lasting decisions if they join forces with someone who knows how to support them to do their best thinking.

This article is a revision of chapter 3 of *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* by Sam Kaner with Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk and Duane Berger, New Society Publishers, Vancouver B.C. 1996.

Most groups do not know how to solve tough problems on their own. They do not know how to build a shared framework of understanding – they seldom even recognize its significance. They dread conflict and discomfort and they try hard to avoid it. Yet, by avoiding the struggle to integrate one another's perspectives, the members of such groups greatly diminish their own potential to be effective. They need a facilitator.

FIRST FUNCTION: THE FACILITATOR ENCOURAGES FULL PARTICIPATION

A Fundamental Problem: Self-Censorship

Inherent in group decision-making is the basic problem that people don't say what they are really thinking. It's hard to take risks, and it's particularly hard to do so when the group's response is likely to be hostile or dismissive. Yet in so many groups, the norms are oppressive. Consider these comments:

- "Haven't we already covered that point?"
- "Let's keep it simple, please."
- "Hurry up – we're running out of time."
- "What does that have to do with anything?"
- "Impossible. Won't work. No way."

Statements like these are injunctions against thinking out loud in a group. They discourage people from saying what they're thinking. The message is: if you want to speak, be simple and polished, and be able to say something familiar enough or entertaining enough for the group to accept.

The injunctions against thinking in public run like an underground stream below the surface of a group's discussion. Without realizing it, most people constantly edit their thinking before they speak. Who wants his/her ideas criticized before they are fully formed? Who wants to be told, "We've already answered that question." Who wants to make an effort to express a complex thought while others in the room are doodling or whispering? This type of treatment leaves many people feeling embarrassed or inadequate. To protect themselves, people censor themselves.

The Facilitator's Contribution

Imagine now that someone in the group understands this inherent difficulty, and that s/he has taken responsibility for helping people overcome it. Imagine that this person has the skills and the temperament to draw people out and help everyone feel heard. Imagine s/he knows how to make room for quiet members; how to reduce the incidence of premature criticism; how to support everyone to keep thinking instead of shutting down. If such a person is actually permitted to perform this role in a group, the quality of the group's participation will vastly improve.

SECOND FUNCTION: THE FACILITATOR PROMOTES MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

A Fundamental Problem: Fixed Positions

A group cannot do its best thinking if the members don't understand one another. But most people find it quite difficult to detach from their fixed positions. Instead, they get caught up in amplifying and defending their own perspectives.

Here's an example. A group of friends began exploring the possibility of forming a new business together. When the topic of money came up, biases emerged. One person wanted the profits divided equally. Another thought everyone should be paid on the basis of how much revenue they would generate. A third person believed the two visionaries should be paid more, to make sure they would not leave. And so on. None of them could change their minds easily. Nor would it have been realistic to expect them to do so – their opinions had been forming and developing for years.

And it gets worse! When people try to discuss their differences, they often misunderstand one another. Each person's life experiences are so individual, so singular; everyone has remarkably different views of the world. What people expect, what they assume, how they use language and how they behave – all these are likely sources of mutual misunderstanding. What's more, when people attempt to clear up a misunderstanding, they usually want their own ideas understood first. They may not say so directly, but their behavior indicates, "I can't really focus on what you are saying until I feel that you have understood my point of view." This easily becomes a vicious cycle. No wonder it's hard for people to let go of fixed positions!

The Facilitator's Contribution

A facilitator helps the group realize that sustainable agreements are built on a foundation of mutual understanding. S/he helps members see that thinking from each other's points of view is invaluable.

Moreover, the facilitator accepts the inevitability of misunderstanding. S/he recognizes that misunderstandings are stressful for everyone involved. The facilitator knows that people in distress need support; they need to be treated respectfully. S/he knows it is essential to stay impartial, to honor all points of view and to keep listening, so that each and every group member has confidence that someone understands them.

THIRD FUNCTION: THE FACILITATOR FOSTERS INCLUSIVE SOLUTIONS

A Fundamental Problem: The Win/Lose Mentality

It's hard for most people to imagine that stakeholders with apparently irreconcilable differences might actually reach an agreement that benefits all parties. Most people are entrenched in a conventional mindset for solving problems and resolving conflicts – namely: "It's either my way or your way."

As a result, most problem-solving discussions degenerate into critiques, rationalizations and sales jobs, as participants remain attached to their fixed positions and work to defend their own interests.

The Facilitator's Contribution

An experienced facilitator knows how to help a group search for innovative ideas that incorporate everyone's points of view. This can be a challenging task – the facilitator is often the only person in the room who has even considered the possibility that inclusive alternatives may exist.

To accomplish this goal, a facilitator draws from the knowledge s/he has acquired by studying the theory and practice of collaborative problem solving. Thus s/he knows the steps it takes to build sustainable agreements.

When a facilitator introduces a group to the values and methods that foster inclusive solutions, the impact is profound. Many people scoff at the very suggestion that a group can find meaningful solutions to difficult problems. As they discover the validity of this new way of thinking, they often become more hopeful about their group's potential effectiveness.

FOURTH FUNCTION: THE FACILITATOR TEACHES NEW THINKING SKILLS

A Fundamental Problem: Inept Meeting Management

Why are most meetings run so poorly? Many people would answer, "It's my boss. S/he doesn't know what s/he is doing." But this is a misattribution – blaming an individual for what is actually a culture-wide problem. The fact is that neither leaders nor other members are skilled in collaborative methods. Very few people understand the mechanics of group decision-making well enough to organize a group into a productive team of thinkers.

The Facilitator's Contribution

A facilitator has both the opportunity and the responsibility to teach group members how to design and manage an effective decision-making process. Here are four sets of skills a group can learn from a competent facilitator:

Principles for Finding Inclusive Solutions Most groups need help learning how to turn Either/Or problems into Both/And solutions. A facilitator can teach people to develop innovative ideas that take everyone's needs into account.

Well-Designed Procedures for Running Meetings Clear, explicit procedures are among the most important thinking skills a group can learn. For example, consider the impact of a badly designed agenda: how can a group be effective when people don't know what they're trying to accomplish? A facilitator can teach an array of procedures for running successful meetings.

Structured Thinking Activities Sometimes a group needs help focusing on the same thing at the same time. At those times, a structured thinking activity – formal brainstorming, for example – can be very helpful. Seasoned facilitators

develop a repertoire of structured thinking activities that can be offered to groups at appropriate times.

Clear Language to Describe Group Dynamics Facilitators should know and teach a model of group dynamics* to provide group members with shared points of reference and shared language. This enables a group to step back from the content of their discussion and talk about their process, so they can improve the dynamics of their meeting.

Conclusion

The facilitator's job is to support the group to do their best thinking. This means, encouraging full participation, promoting mutual understanding, fostering inclusive solutions and teaching new thinking skills. When a facilitator performs these four functions effectively, the results are impressive: s/he strengthens the skills, awareness and confidence of individual group members; s/he strengthens the structure and capacity of the group as a whole; and s/he vastly increases the likelihood that the group will reach sustainable agreements.

*One such model is *The Team Thinking Model* developed by Kaner et. al, 1996, p. 21.

To purchase a copy of the *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, check your local book store or order direct from the authors.

Phone: (415) 641-9773

fax: (415) 282-9878

email: duane@communityatwork.com