

Fact-File 19: Facilitation – why it’s fundamental to leadership....

Extract from our self-coaching Guide on Fundamental Facilitation

Why a Facilitation approach?

Teams are a part of every leader’s landscape. Leaders need to know how to form them then get people to work well in them. They need to build engagement and commitment to common goals, manage team relationships and get people taking action that ends in productive performance.

Behind all of these essential leader actions is the ability to facilitate. Facilitation’s a fundamental set of skills for leaders, if you want to take a more engaging, collaborative and inclusive approach, where shared solutions and ideas are sought. It’s also fundamental to good group functioning.

- ❑ Group working can be really effective. But the truth is many teams tend to flounder if left entirely to their own devices. People get distracted, diverted or lost in the detail
- ❑ To get good results, we have to pay attention not only to what the group is doing but how they do it – the processes they use to work on steps they need to achieve their goals.
- ❑ Without good group process, progress stalls, meetings fail, conversations bog-down, good ideas get quashed, decisions get hijacked, opinions polarise, people disengage, actions remain unclear and commitments lapse.

This is where the facilitation role comes in. Skills like asking good questions, clarifying, focusing on goals, summarising and making a group’s work easier by structuring and guiding patterns of participation and contribution are useful, even crucial, in many organisation settings.

In fact, facilitation’s a special kind of leadership that’s not just for leaders. Groups work better together when everyone has some level of facilitation ability and knowledge of good group process. So developing these skills more broadly in your team isn’t a bad idea either.

Let’s take a closer look at the characteristics and benefits of a facilitative style of leadership.

What is Facilitation?

What do facilitators do? In a nutshell, they help groups to work creatively, constructively and productively together to get good results. *Facilitation* is about finding ways to make it easier for groups to do whatever it is they set out to do –

set goals, dissect problems, generate ideas, discuss issues, make decisions or plan actions.



That’s what good leaders do too. In fact, leaders often act in ways that resemble many of the roles a facilitator plays. For example:

- ❑ They observe how teams work together; they help teams share information, set goals, sort priorities and make decisions.
- ❑ Like facilitators, the chief role of leaders is to help teams stay focused, keep on-track with tasks, maintain momentum and challenge behaviours that obstruct good teamwork.

“At times leaders can benefit greatly by stepping aside from the content of people’s work to facilitate the process. As a facilitative leader, they involve followers as much as possible in creating the group’s vision and purpose, carrying out the vision and purpose and building a productive and cohesive team. Facilitation can be seen in this light as a leadership approach.” Fran Rees *The Facilitator Excellence Handbook 2nd edition p.19*

Facilitation is a set of practices, protocols and tools for leading, communicating and working with groups, which have evolved over time to help overcome some of the inevitable obstacles that get in the way of working well together. For example:

- ❑ Groups dominated by a few outspoken or overly-assertive members (or leader?)
- ❑ Withdrawal, lack of engagement or interest in team meetings
- ❑ Unresolved differences or lack of clarity about goals and priorities
- ❑ Ongoing stand-offs, feuds, competition or rivalry between group members
- ❑ Poor processes for sharing information or making decisions
- ❑ Decisions and actions are not sufficiently supported or actioned (and often resisted)
- ❑ Conversations that continually go off track or meetings that go round in circles
- ❑ Group discussion that descends into debate or argument where nothing gets solved

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Whatever the group or task, all facilitators have one thing in common. They act as helpers, guides, organisers and minders for team process.

Facilitation improves the effectiveness of groups. It makes group-work easier and more efficient because facilitators lead groups by giving them appropriate tools and methods at the right time to tackle the right tasks. All teams work better together when they have a facilitator with the right tools who can:

- ❑ Suggest processes or tools teams can use for various group tasks and helps teams improve the processes they are using
- ❑ Help teams set goals, shape shared visions and agree strategies and directions
- ❑ Assist teams to collect, generate and share ideas and information
- ❑ Think up ways to encourage more equal participation, commitment and involvement
- ❑ Help teams make better decisions and consider different alternatives and options
- ❑ Help teams overcome blockages when they get stuck, reach an impasse or aren't working at their best
- ❑ Suggest ways to deal with group problems and conflict constructively and work out better ways to interact and talk with each other
- ❑ Help teams to identify and plan what actions to take, maintain momentum, stay focused on the task and keep on-track

Facilitation – the 4 elements

Some people are inclined to think facilitating is only about running effective team meetings – but there's a lot more to it than that. Here's a model of 4 main elements behind effective facilitation:

1. Goals and Task

is at the centre of facilitation because facilitation is about helping people do what they have to do to get things done.



"Effective facilitation is about helping people get their work done." Weaver & Farrell *Managers as Facilitators: A Practical Guide* p.xii

2. Tools and Process is next. The *means* a facilitator employs to help teams work on tasks – various tools, models and processes facilitators can use to make getting to their goals easier.

For facilitators, group process is just as important as the task the team works on. Why? Because most people working in teams tend to pay more attention to **WHAT** has to be done - the '*tasks*' or *content* – and they often overlook **HOW** they go about doing it – the *process*. Teams often find it hard to step back and see how they approach a task – the process seems invisible to them.

3. Team Dynamics: Because process is invisible to many teams, another key facilitation role is to *keep an eye on group dynamics* – the patterns of interaction and behaviour in the group.

4. Self-Mastery is the last element in our model. It's an aspect that's often overlooked. Yet the most cogent 'tool' any facilitator brings into a group situation is themselves and their own levels of self-awareness and emotional intelligence.

Facilitating effectively is a skill that develops with experience. It requires an enabling, empowering, disciplined-but-relaxed approach to working with people that opens minds and helps them to make connections between tasks and process, in an enjoyable, constructive and liberating way, not an overly directive, '*do-this-now*' style.

Facilitative Leadership

To be effective facilitators, formal leaders need to understand the difference between conventional leadership and a more facilitative approach.

Traditionally, leaders decided what to do and how to do it. Many of us have been conditioned to expect leaders to set direction, decide the strategy and generally take control.

But command-and-control has had its day. Most people you lead want to be involved and consulted, not coerced. We've known for ages how this raises motivation, commitment and satisfaction levels. On the other hand, we also know how directive approaches stunt initiative, increase dependency on the leader and create a climate of learned helplessness.

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“The facilitator role is quite different from the traditional manager role, which ‘plans, directs and controls’. It is also different from the traditional leader role, which ‘sets vision, tone and direction’.... Many people struggle because they try to facilitate without a clear sense of how facilitating differs from leading and managing. They associate facilitation with ‘touchy-feely’ activities and ‘feel-good’ sessions that are a waste of time and money... facilitating is much more than running smooth meetings...” Weaver & Farrell *Managers as Facilitators: A Practical Guide* p.xii

Facilitative leaders don’t just dictate their own solutions or plans of action. They focus heavily on group participation, consensus and collective contribution to achieve objectives and goals.

ATTRIBUTE	FACILITATIVE LEADERSHIP STYLE	MORE DIRECTIVE LEADERSHIP STYLE
Conversational Patterns	More questioning & prompting	<i>More telling and proposing</i>
Personal Orientation	Collective. It’s about the group and what’s good for them	<i>Individual. Self-centred on the leader or their in-group</i>
Decision-making Approach	More participative – works on consensus or concordance	<i>More commanding – directive or impositional</i>
Symbolism	A round table with the leader somewhere in the middle	<i>A long table with leader at the head</i>
Influence Approach	Exerts influence through process. Willing to be influenced by group	<i>Exerts influence directly – more dominant, coercive – has last say</i>
Advocacy & Interest	More open and neutral	<i>More assertive – rarely neutral</i>

Exhibit 1: Distinguishing between a more facilitative and more directive style of leadership

Good facilitative leaders believe carefully bringing people together and using good group processes to harness collective thinking power achieves greater success and better solutions that are supported by everyone. Here are some features you find in more facilitative leaders:

- They encourage genuine participation from their group and higher levels of it too. This often means going with the group decision rather than imposing their own.

- They ask questions to bring out a range of possible options from the group, not dictate their own solutions
- They get people to think together and share ideas more enthusiastically and openly.
- They build commitment to common goals and approaches, focus the group energy, unleash creativity and make team meetings more meaningful and fun
- Cultivate more collaborative approaches to decision-making, problem-solving and action planning
- They purposely tap into creative capacities of the group, draw out pertinent information from individuals and have the ability to bring together best ideas from different people
- They believe the combined experience and knowledge of a group can lead to better goal achievement. higher levels of motivation and contribute to even greater success

One of the main reservations many leaders have in adopting a more facilitative approach is a lack of know-how, skill, confidence and facilitation tools. This is combined sometimes with:

- A sense that being directive and commanding is either more efficient, faster or simply what’s expected of leaders.
- Fears that a facilitative approach may expose their own personal weaknesses and deficits in terms of relating and people skills.
- Concerns that a facilitative approach is more time-intensive and takes longer in terms of achieving practical, no-nonsense results within tight time constraints.

Sometimes, people have reservations that are unfounded. They think perhaps that facilitation is more complex, more challenging or more time-consuming than it really needs to be.

- While some of your people will try to convince you the command-and-control approach to leadership is what they want, the reality is they will then resist every directive you make.
- While they will stand back and say you should come up with the options and make the hard decisions, they will then complain bitterly you didn’t consult and involve them.

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Avoiding this ‘rock-and-hard-place’ position some will put you in, requires courage and resolve to take a different, more facilitative approach.

Benefits of Facilitative Leadership

Taking more of a facilitation approach gives any leader a new way of relating to people – of developing your team to direct themselves rather than lead from the top.

A facilitative style can also significantly improve productivity, relationships and the way people approach their work. Some other benefits of taking a more facilitative approach to leadership include:

- ❑ Harnessing everyone’s group creativity and collective problem-solving power
- ❑ Improving teamwork, relationships and group accountability for results
- ❑ Increasing self-responsibility – treating others as self-governing adults
- ❑ Helping teams handle their own personal and work challenges
- ❑ Increasing buy-in into decisions and agreed courses of actions
- ❑ Clarifying goals and priorities and getting everyone pointed in the same direction
- ❑ Having more constructive conversations where ideas are shared more openly
- ❑ Generating new possibilities, options, committed action and collective thinking
- ❑ Easier actioning of plans since those who’ll be implementing contributed to their creation and have a greater sense of ownership

- ❑ Creates a more open and outgoing workplace climate that respects the different skills and contributions of all and actively demonstrates the value of everyone’s combined talents

All leaders need to play the role of team facilitator at times – and it’s a style staff generally prefer.

With its focus on asking not telling, engaging and guiding rather than controlling and directing, and pulling together rather than competing, facilitative leadership is a set of skills, a suite of tools and a style of personal influence, communication and ‘group-working’ every leader can benefit from using more of.

The Change Forum conducts a practical, 2-3 day clinic on **Fundamental Facilitation for leaders** and other professionals interested in developing or renewing group facilitation skills and exploring what it means to adopt a facilitative approach to leadership. For information and a course Brochure contact us:

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