What Type of Facilitator Are You?

A common definition of ‘facilitate’ is to make things easier. It’s possible to come from many positions to the role of a facilitator of a meeting. This Innovation Insight explores the many variations of the role of a facilitator, in terms of qualifications, experience, and responsibilities. It also identifies the strategies a facilitator can use to ensure success, whatever their formal or informal facilitative role may be.

Facilitation Today

First, what interpretation of the term facilitator applies? The focus here is on process facilitation. Process facilitators are generally expected to assist with how the group is approaching its topic and task, in terms of both progress towards the outcome and maintenance of relationships. The facilitator is expected to remain neutral regarding content the group is addressing.

From an original concept of professional facilitators who come into an organization to work with staff, many variations on the role of a facilitator have evolved. There are now professional and semi-professional facilitators who work from within an organization, with facilitation constituting all or a significant part of their job responsibilities. There are volunteer facilitators who facilitate occasionally and temporarily. There is the facilitative leader, the individual who supervises or leads a group and their group meetings. Then there are facilitative participants who just want to have the meeting they are attending be more productive. These last two facilitative roles may not be entirely content neutral. But in addition to their interest in the topic and outcome of the meeting, they have an interest in the meeting being run efficiently and effectively.

Defining the types

Working definitions may clarify each type.

External facilitators are those who are self-employed or work within a consulting company. Their work is with clients in other organizations. They are likely to have some certification, such as Certified
Professional Facilitator from the International Association of Facilitators (IAF), or Certified Master Facilitator from the International Institute for Facilitation. They may specialize in work for specific fields, for functional units within an organization, for specific deliverables or outcomes, or using specific models and approaches. Professional facilitators generally charge for their services.

**Internal facilitators** are those who provide facilitation services on a regular basis within the organization where they are employed. They have training and experience, but may not have a certification. Their strengths can be familiarity with organizational culture, politics, and procedures. Their services may be centrally funded by their organization or their time may be billable.

**Volunteer facilitators** are those for whom facilitation is not their primary job. They have some training, but probably do not have a certification. Volunteer facilitators provide facilitation services when requested, within their work organization or within community organizations. The personal benefit of their work is individual and contributes to their professional development.

**Facilitative leaders** manage meetings in the work or project units they supervise or lead. The facilitative leader would like to balance the roles of supervisor or leader and facilitator. Their objective is effective meetings with full participation in discussions and buy-in by subordinates or team members for the decisions that are made.

**Facilitative participants** are those who attend meetings, have some knowledge of facilitation skills and tools, and use these skills when they are in meetings so that their time and knowledge, and the time and knowledge of the others in the meeting, is used effectively and quality outcomes result.

Table 1 provides some of the characteristics of each type of facilitative role. Table 2 includes information on the types of initiatives and activities each may facilitate. There is no one ideal type of facilitator that is the best for all situations.

**Being successful whatever your facilitative role**

Effective, successful facilitators are skilled in the use of varied approaches, tools, and activities. There are many other references that provide information about those skills, including Penn State’s *Innovation Insights* #15, *Effective Meetings* and #16, *Facilitating Teams for Organizational IMPROVement*. The specifics of those skills are too numerous to address here.

However, effective meeting facilitation can be broken down into four stages and sets of actions - contracting and planning before the meeting, conducting the meeting, closing the meeting, and following up after the meeting. No matter what the type of facilitator, there are common strategies to ensure an effective and productive discussion or meeting.

Table 3 provides strategies for success in each facilitative role at each stage of a meeting.
### Table 1: Characteristics of Each Type of Facilitative Role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualifications and Training</th>
<th>Type of Facilitator</th>
<th>External to the organization</th>
<th>Internal to the organization, but external to the unit being facilitated</th>
<th>Internal volunteer</th>
<th>Facilitative leader or project leader</th>
<th>Facilitative participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certification</td>
<td>External to the organization</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Extended training, skills, and knowledge</td>
<td>Internal to the organization, but external to the unit being facilitated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some training, skills, and knowledge</td>
<td>Internal volunteer</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitative leader or project leader</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitative participant</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Charge for services</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Formality of agreement</td>
<td>Written contract with deliverables</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Written agreement, memo or e-mail</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities</td>
<td>Specific deliverables</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>As agreed to</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and experience</td>
<td>Specific tools, types of organizations, models, services, approaches</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Home organization culture, politics, and procedures</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Types of Projects for Each Type of Facilitative Role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Facilitator</th>
<th>Types of Projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External to the organization</td>
<td>Large, high cost or political consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal to the organization, but external to the unit being facilitated</td>
<td>Longer term or more complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal volunteer</td>
<td>Shorter term or one event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitative leader or project leader</td>
<td>Ongoing unit or project responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitative participant</td>
<td>Self-designated; not in a formal facilitator role</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3: Strategies to Ensure You Are Successful in Your Facilitative Role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting stage</th>
<th>Contracting and planning before the meeting</th>
<th>Conducting the meeting</th>
<th>Closing the meeting</th>
<th>Following up after the meeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of facilitator</strong></td>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **External to organization** | • Negotiate a formal contract with:  
  o Client expectations  
  o Timeline  
  o Stated deliverables  
  o Stated charges | • Practice all the skills and use appropriate tools you are familiar with as a professional facilitator | • Clarify what has been accomplished  
  • Identify any action items  
  • Review what you have contracted to provide | • Provide any deliverables agreed on  
  • Discuss next steps  
  • Think about what went well and what you learned so you can be more effective next time |
| **Internal to organization but external to client unit** | • Have a discussion and reach agreement about responsibilities and expected outcomes  
  • Determine what you are capable of and comfortable doing  
  • Determine what will work in the unit’s culture  
  • Put it in writing so both facilitator and client are working from the same page  
  • State and document charges if your time is billable  
  • Agree on how/who will record the discussions and outcomes of the meeting | • Determine the relationship between you and the person you contracted with during the meeting  
  • Clarify whether you are running the meeting or just supporting your client as they lead the meeting  
  • Remember the importance of neutrality and the potential you have to influence the group  
  • Be aware of how involved you are getting in content discussions vs. just managing the process | • Clarify what has been accomplished  
  • Identify any action items  
  • Clarify next steps  
  • Reach agreement on/reconfirm how the content and results of the meeting will be recorded and shared, and when they will be received | • Take care of whatever you agreed to do or provide  
  • Discuss any possible next steps with your contact  
  • Think about what went well from the client’s perspective and what you might do differently next time  
  • Think about what you learned so you can be more effective next time |
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|               | **Internal volunteer** | • Work with internal facilitation resources as well as the prospective client/team to clarify their expectations and your capabilities, and reach an agreement on what you will be doing and providing  
• Determine what facilitative approaches you are familiar and comfortable with  
• Arrange any support or training you may need | • Stay focused on your neutral role | • Clarify what has been accomplished  
• Identify any action items | • Take care of whatever you agreed to do or provide  
• Think about what went well and what you learned so you can be more effective next time |
|               | **Facilitative leader** | • Have a conversation with yourself about:  
 o Desired outcomes  
 o How any decisions will ultimately be made  
 o How you will minimize your leadership role and maximize your facilitative role  
 o Who will take notes during the meeting  
• Decide what facilitative approaches you are familiar and comfortable with | • Be clear with the group early in the meeting about:  
 o the purpose of the meeting  
 o what the group is actually examining or deciding on  
 o what items have already been decided  
 o what decisions will be made  
 o how decisions will be made  
• Share information openly with the group  
• Remember the importance of neutrality and the potential you have to influence the group  
• Be aware of how involved you are getting in content discussions vs. just managing the process  
• If you are sharing content information, be the last in the group to speak | • Clarify what has been accomplished  
• Identify any action items  
• Identify next steps  
• Tell the group how meeting notes will be distributed, and when they can expect them | • Make sure meeting notes and outcomes are distributed in a timely manner  
• Think about what went well and what you learned so you can be more effective next time |
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- Don’t hesitate to ask in advance about:
  - the purpose of the meeting
  - expected outcomes
  - who will be attending the meeting
  - any work that needs to be done in advance
- Request an agenda that clearly states:
  - the topics to be discussed
  - who has the lead on each topic
  - start and end times of the meeting
- Ask open-ended, non-evaluative questions to clarify the purpose of the meeting and desired outcomes.
- Offer reminders about where the group is in the agenda and how much time is left to end the meeting on time.
- Look around to check attention/participation levels, and comment if it appears that not all are engaged, without pointing out specific individuals.
- If it appears that a decision has been made, restate it so that all in the group are aware of this and agree with it.
- Ask open-ended questions for clarification about:
  - what has been decided
  - action items – who is responsible, when it will be done
  - other next steps or follow-up meetings
  - who will be distributing meeting notes and when you can expect them.
- If you don’t receive meeting notes and other related information when expected, ask about them.
- Think about what went well and what you learned so you can be more effective next time.
Whether a facilitator formally invited in to work with a group, an informal facilitative participant, or one of the less formal facilitative roles between, facilitative skills and insights can be used. The results can include more effective use of time, higher quality outcomes, and more satisfied group members.

References and Resources:


International Institute for Facilitation *Certified Master Facilitator Program*. Viewed April 30, 2015.


The Pennsylvania State University. *Innovation Insight #15: Effective Meetings*

The Pennsylvania State University. *Innovation Insight #16: Facilitating Teams for Organizational IMPROVEment*

The Pennsylvania State University. *Innovation Insight #29: Becoming an Effective Facilitator within Your Own Organization*


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