



POLICY, PLANNING AND PROBLEM SOLVING

The 3 Most Important Considerations When Hiring a Facilitator

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Introduction

Can any person facilitate discussions or does a facilitator need special skills? Some people think that anyone can facilitate discussions. This article contends that this assumption is not true.

A facilitator needs to possess specific skills if she is going to achieve the objects desired from the engagement. These skills include the ability to:

1. execute a variety of facilitation styles
2. remain neutral
3. honor the objective of the exercise
4. craft the process to achieve the desired outcomes
5. manage conflict, and
6. support the group to reach consensus.

Execute a Variety of Facilitation Styles

Background required

The best facilitators are knowledgeable about management, team dynamics, learning styles, and mind styles. They understand systems, how they evolve and change over time, and view conflict as normal and healthy. They can demonstrate proven methods for conflict resolutions and the importance of preserving relationships during the process.

They accept change as the only constant, welcome it, and are able to assist others to view it from that perspective.

Skills set

Excellent facilitators demonstrate proficient problem solving and decision-making skills. They are comfortable using a variety of group methods and avoid any techniques which can lead to mistrust or isolation of any participant. The process is as important to them as the outcomes and they modify engagement methods based on the changing needs of the group.

They continually evaluate what worked and what did not and what they will change in the future. They actively listen to participants, demonstrate excellent verbal skills, can accurately capture input, question when input is unclear, and constantly seek feedback.

Respect culture and history

In order to ensure their methods meet the needs of their clients, facilitators ensure they understand the history and aspects of culture which need to be honored during the process. They leave their own biases at the door and ensure the atmosphere emanates trust, safety and openness. Diverse opinions are welcomed and participants are asked to focus on the issues at hand rather than on people. Ethical behaviours are practiced at all times and the values of the entity are respected.

Personal opinions

Irrespective of her own beliefs, the facilitator venerates the good judgment of the group. She trusts its ability to reach the desired outcomes and understands that when ideas of the group are accepted, implementation and long-term success is achievable. Personal and field-specific expertise is equally valued and she does not perceive the need for any person either to be defensive or excluded.

Honor the Objective of the Exercise

A proficient facilitator is intent on developing effective working partnerships with her clients. She takes time to ensure that she has the same understanding of the objective of the facilitation as her clients.

She documents the tasks, who is responsible, who can take corrective action, the deliverables, the time frames, financial commitments and timelines. To ensure the objectives are reached she chooses and arranges the physical environment to support the agreed-upon purpose of the facilitation, plans to ensure everyone's time is used effectively, and sets the stage for inclusion and active engagement.

Manage Conflict

Rules of engagement

Most people make assumptions about any type of group engagement. There are people who

- attend willingly and want to move ahead proactively
- will watch and see what the majority want before they speak
- want to talk most during the breaks and not want to express their true opinions to the group for fear of rejection, and
- those who feel they had to attend and have no intention of actively engaging in the process.

Feeling safe

The facilitator explains the process prior to beginning the facilitation, manages disruptive behavior, and ensures everyone feels safe during the dialogue.

She assists participants to express how they feel, look at their beliefs about the process, and set the rules to be followed. This is necessary if participants are going to be able to think and speak freely. It is also essential that they understand that brainstorming does not mean they are only looking for viable options, and that all ideas will be evaluated based on specific criteria.

Evaluating Ideas

The criteria used to evaluate ideas could include the following:

- Is the idea realistic? If so, why? If not, why not? What reliable evidence does the group have to substantiate its belief?
- Can the idea be implemented (from human resources, time, and financial perspectives)?
- Does the idea honor the culture and values of the entity or the team?
- Does the idea need to be examined further?
- If it was tried in the past and did not work, does that mean it will not work in the present/future? If so, why? What factors would need to change to ensure it could work?
- Is there a champion (person who would ensure this idea was a success) for this option?
- Is there a way to collect evidence to demonstrate to the team that the idea was implemented successfully?

Final Comment

Facilitation requires planning, understanding of the process, belief in the power of groups, commitment to diversity, and acceptance of the importance of change.

Participants need to feel safe during the process and understand that the rules of engagement apply equally to everyone involved. A person's position in the organization does not come entitle one to extra privileges. All ideas are honored, opinions are needed, and evidence is welcome.