

10

Steps to

Successful

Facilitation



**Association for
Talent Development**

2nd Edition

10 Steps to Successful *Facilitation*



Association for
Talent Development

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ATD Press is an internationally renowned source of insightful and practical information on talent development, training, and professional development.

ATD Press
1640 King Street
Alexandria, VA 22314 USA

Ordering information: Books published by ATD Press can be purchased by visiting ATD's website at www.td.org/books or by calling 800.628.2783 or 703.683.8100.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018907842

ISBN-10: 1-949036-28-6
ISBN-13: 978-1-949036-28-2
e-ISBN: 978-1-949036-29-9

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Printed by Data Reproductions Corporations, Auburn Hills, MI

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Introduction

The art of facilitation is a necessary and evolving skill, and an important component of every professional's business acumen. Facilitation skills are essential today for all professionals dealing with any kind of work group, including management, boards of directors, top leadership, task forces, committees, and project teams. Facilitation involves processes and expertise that help groups to function effectively, including how they talk to each other, identify and solve problems, make decisions, and handle conflict. The facilitator guides the group to work together more efficiently—to create synergy, generate new ideas, and gain consensus and agreement—and guide them to a specific outcome. Facilitators point participants in the right direction, make suggestions, take steps to enhance the experience for the participants, and give guidance—but do not do the work for the group.

The fact is, facilitation is not about you—it is about the group. Standing in the spotlight as the facilitator can be a scary and daunting experience.

This second edition of *10 Steps to Successful Facilitation* provides an updated step-by-step guide for understanding your role as facilitator, planning your session, and walking through each milestone of a successful meeting, including techniques for accomplishing objectives and dealing with disruptive participants. We've reorganized the material to align with challenges facilitators face today, including the increasing prevalence of virtual meetings.

Use the key steps in this book as needed. For example, if you have been asked to facilitate a meeting with a predefined agenda, focus on steps 3–10. Or, if you have been asked to facilitate a group for

a project in its infancy and you are faced with a completely blank slate, then it might be most appropriate to start with step 1 and work through all the steps systematically.

Inside This Book

Each chapter of this second edition has been updated with new material. Our goal is to help you easily understand how to facilitate a productive meeting, prepare for and avoid any potential pitfalls, and hone an increasingly valuable business skill. In particular, this book delves into each of the following steps:

Step 1: Understand the Role of a Facilitator

There are many myths regarding the role of a facilitator in helping a group achieve defined goals. For example, a facilitator is not a leader who directs what the group should do. This step delves into defining facilitation; the differences between facilitators, presenters, and trainers; the primary roles of a facilitator; and how a facilitator is chosen.

Step 2: Plan the Facilitation Session

The goal of facilitation is to accomplish defined objectives. This step describes how to set up the meeting for success by identifying the client's goals, creating an audience profile, preparing an agenda, setting up meeting logistics—including selecting and arranging the room for optimal participation—and assigning any necessary pre-work to the group.

Step 3: Begin the Meeting

With the groundwork laid, it's time to open the meeting, engage the participants, and help them to feel more comfortable with each other through icebreakers, if necessary (which can be especially important for virtual groups). A strong beginning also explains what the participants can expect throughout the session and helps reassure them that their valuable time will be respected with a purposeful, well-directed meeting.

Step 4: Help the Group Generate Ideas and Make Decisions

Because a large percentage of a facilitator's time is spent helping groups generate ideas and make decisions, this step describes a wealth of updated tools and activities that successful facilitators can use to spark creativity, rank and prioritize solutions, and finalize decisions as a group.

Step 5: Integrate Media and Technology for Impact

When facilitating a meeting, chances are that you'll need to leverage at least one type of media. This updated step describes the features and benefits of various types of media and visual aids to effectively facilitate sessions that clearly communicate information, capture ideas, and determine the best solutions.

Step 6: Keep the Meeting Moving and Accomplish Objectives

This step involves facilitating the flow of the session, as well as using questioning techniques, tools, and activities to engage participants and ensure effective communication throughout the session. Most business professionals have experienced meetings that stagnate as participants push their own agendas; facilitators can keep it on track.

Step 7: Leverage Strategies to Develop Teams and Deal With Conflict

Unfortunately, many facilitators encounter difficult participants who may be the "one bad apple to spoil the bunch"; or perhaps the entire group is a bit dysfunctional and apathetically goes through the motions without making any progress toward accomplishing the group goals. This step explores the stages of group development and the process of identifying and dealing with behaviors that can hinder group effectiveness.

Step 8: Facilitate Virtually

Thanks to technology, participants no longer have to gather in person to hold effective meetings. This step, new for the second edition, describes the differences you can expect between facilitating a virtual

rather than an in-person meeting, including how to ensure effective communication when you cannot see the participants (and they can't see you), and how to make sure you leverage the correct technology.

Step 9: Close the Meeting and Follow Up

The end of the meeting is just as important as the beginning. Carefully planned closing activities, including a well-executed debrief session, will summarize the group's accomplishments, make its next steps clear, and allow the group to depart with a feeling of accomplishment rather than a muddled sense of lost time.

Step 10: Evaluate the Facilitation Session

The last step in the facilitation process is to reflect on the session and evaluate how well you and the group achieved its goals. This critical step ultimately leads to continuous improvement and refinement of your facilitation skills. This step identifies several strategies for obtaining and analyzing information to evaluate the session's success.

Review these 10 steps as often as needed to build and perfect your ability to facilitate effective, performance-driven facilitation sessions.

10 Steps to Successful Facilitation is part of the 10 Steps series and was written to provide you with a proven process, quick reference tips, and practical worksheets to help you successfully facilitate any session or meeting. We hope that the tips and tools contained in this book will guide you each step of the way in developing and delivering an effective facilitation session.

Step 1

Understand the Role of a Facilitator

Overview

- Define what facilitation is.
- Determine the differences among facilitators, trainers, and presenters.
- Clarify the roles and skills of a facilitator.
- Establish how facilitators are selected.

You've probably had some experience working in a group setting at one time or another. Groups, a basic work unit of organizations, are often tasked with providing a range of perspectives on an issue, solving problems, or coordinating complex work processes.

For many people, the experience is a mixed bag. At times, group members work well together—their thoughts, ideas, and approaches on how to get something done are similar, and the work flows. At other times the team flounders, struggling to identify basic goals and objectives, never coming to agreement, and eventually disbanding, feeling frustrated. What differentiates the successful groups from the inefficient ones? Facilitation.

What Is Facilitation?

Facilitation is the art of moving a group of people through meetings, planning sessions, or training, and successfully achieving a specific goal. Typically, the facilitator has no decision-making authority within a group but guides the group to work more efficiently together, create synergy, generate new ideas, and gain consensus. How do facilitators accomplish all of this? By helping to improve a group's processes—how they talk to one another, identify and solve problems, make decisions, and handle conflict.

You don't have to be a professional facilitator to be asked to facilitate a group. Facilitators come from many backgrounds and may hold various roles within or external to an organization, such as leaders, managers, consultants, coaches, trainers, and formal facilitators. Anyone can appoint or hire a facilitator, for any type of meeting. You may be asked by a senior manager to mediate an internal meeting

POINTER

One of the key tenets of facilitation is that the process and experience is not about you—it is about the participants. The purpose of facilitation is to guide a group to an agreed-upon outcome. Facilitators point participants in the right direction, make suggestions, take steps to enhance the experience for the participants, and offer guidance—but do not do the work for group.

of your peers; as an executive, you may be asked to facilitate a series of meetings with a group in another department; you may be asked to facilitate a virtual meeting for a team that is scattered around the world and have never met; you may be asked as a volunteer to facilitate a community meeting or a meeting for a nonprofit that is important to you. And, of course, there's an entire industry of professional facilitators hired for meetings of all shapes and sizes.

Whatever the occasion, facilitation skills are essential for all professionals dealing with any kind of work group, including management, executive boards, senior leadership, task forces, committees, and project

teams. The fact is, facilitation skills are assumed to be part of every professional's business acumen in today's work environment.

What Are the Differences Among Facilitators, Trainers, and Presenters?

Facilitators assist teams in their meetings to improve how the team works together and comes to decisions, ensuring every voice is heard and conflicts are successfully resolved. In comparison, a presenter provides information to the group, typically in a one-sided delivery to an audience; for example, a presenter may report annual sales numbers or new HR policies to a group of employees. Trainers are also responsible for imparting information to their audience, but their goal is for the group to comprehend and retain the material, so training sessions are usually more interactive than a presentation. Trainers and presenters are also typically considered authorities on their subjects, but facilitators don't need to have any special knowledge about the subject of the meeting. Facilitators focus on the group dynamics and processes. Tool 1-1 overviews some differences in roles and responsibilities between trainers and presenters on the one hand and facilitators on the other.

Effective facilitators are accountable to the group; therefore, the facilitator must earn their trust. It's a different role from that of a presenter or trainer, where there is a clear and obvious separation between the students and the instructor, and in which the presenter is positioned as an expert. In that situation, the learners are merely passive recipients of the knowledge. In contrast, facilitators operate as impartial peers to participants; they must earn trust not through subject matter expertise, but their ability to successfully guide discussion and consensus while getting down into things alongside participants.

POINTER

Facilitators are experts in the process of facilitation—not necessarily the content being discussed or decided on during the meeting.

TOOL 1-1

TRAINERS, PRESENTERS, AND FACILITATORS

Trainers and Presenters	Facilitators
Deliver information	Assist with group discussions
Share their knowledge	Allow members of the group to share knowledge with one another
Are subject matter experts	Are not subject matters themselves, but support a group of participants who are
Focus on individual learning objectives	Focus on group objectives
Share the right information	Build consensus and agreement around decisions the group makes
Have a point of view	Are objective, nonjudgmental, not stakeholders
Direct, tell, inform, teach	Listen, question, coach
Control all facets of the session	Share control with the group
Derive credibility from demonstrating subject matter expertise and presentation skills	Derive credibility from using speaking, interpersonal, and questioning skills; managing the environment; sharing ideas; remaining flexible; and driving the group to agreement

Roles and Skills of a Facilitator

Facilitators wear many hats during a meeting—from managing the clock to making sure no one person dominates the meeting—all of which are critical to creating an effective experience. No matter which hats you wear, it is imperative that you remain objective when guiding the group. Skilled facilitators strive for excellence in three main areas: managing the facilitation process, acting as a resource, and remaining neutral.

Managing the facilitation process includes:

- following the agenda
- keeping members on task

- guiding the flow of contributions
- striving for consensus
- focusing on problem solving
- rewarding and motivating group members.

The facilitator acts as a resource to the group. This involves:

- advising on problem-solving techniques
- coaching for successful group behaviors and processes
- protecting group members from personal attacks.

It is essential that the facilitator remain neutral. This entails:

- staying emotionally uninvolved
- keeping out of the spotlight
- becoming invisible when the group is facilitating itself
- withholding personal opinions about the subject matter.

Facilitator Skills

Facilitators can come from any background and a variety of experience levels. The best facilitators, however, demonstrate the following skills.

Listening—a facilitator needs to listen actively and hear what every team member is saying.

Questioning—a facilitator should be skilled in asking questions. Good questions are open ended and stimulate discussion.

Problem solving—a facilitator should be skilled at applying group problem-solving techniques, including:

- defining the problem
- determining the cause
- considering a range of solutions
- weighing advantages and disadvantages of solutions
- selecting the best solution
- implementing the solution
- evaluating the results.

POINTER

Good facilitators are:

- honest
- accurate
- clear
- informative
- interesting.

Notice that “entertaining” is not on the list.

Remember, a facilitation session is not about you—it’s about helping the participants achieve the desired outcomes.

Resolving conflict—a facilitator should recognize that conflict among group members is natural and, as long as it's expressed politely, should not suppress it. Indeed, it should be expected and dealt with constructively.

Using a participative style—a facilitator should be able to encourage all team members to actively engage and contribute in meetings. This includes creating an atmosphere in which group members are willing to share their feelings and opinions. This does not mean the facilitator should offer opinions on the content of the meeting, however.

Accepting others—a facilitator should maintain an open mind and not criticize the ideas and suggestions of group members.

Empathizing—a facilitator should be able to “walk a mile in another’s shoes” to understand the team members’ feelings.

Leading—a facilitator must be able to keep participants focused and the discussion on target.

Extra Considerations for Virtual Facilitators

Meetings are not always held in person; increasingly companies are taking advantage of the many virtual meeting platforms to conduct meetings via videoconferencing tools. The role of a facilitator of a virtual meeting (a meeting that uses technology to gather a group of people who cannot meet in person because of distance or schedules) remains the same but is perhaps even more difficult. As a virtual facilitator, there are two additional considerations:

Focus on clear, concise communication. The lack of in-person communication makes building team rapport more difficult. Take care to make sure every participant has a chance to comment; consider keeping a list of participants nearby and making tally marks each time one speaks. If someone hasn't spoken in a while, ask for their comments by name. Also, do not let any one person dominate the discussion. During in-person meetings, participants can let someone know if they've been speaking too often or too long with body language, including shifting in their seats, rolling eyes, and beginning side conversations. In the absence of these gestures, it may fall to the facilitator to let a participant know when it's time to let someone

else make a comment. Finally, ask questions to ensure the group has a common understanding of the issues; for example, “To summarize the last several minutes, we believe an increased social media presence should be the top priority. Is that correct?”

Ensure the processes are working. Try to incorporate at least two check-in points with the group to make sure the meeting flow and the technology is working for everyone. Ask once, about 30 minutes after the meeting has started, if anyone is having problems with the technology, hearing any speaker, or feeling lost. Check in again half-way through the meeting to make sure everyone is engaged and that the meeting processes are working for all participants.

How Is a Facilitator Chosen?

Facilitators can be internal resources—from inside the company that’s holding the meeting—or external, hired or appointed from outside the company. There are pros and cons to each type.

Sometimes, senior executives are appointed to facilitate a meeting. In addition to their experience, they may bring deep knowledge about the company, the issue at hand, and the decisions that would most benefit the company. Ironically, however, they can be among the worst facilitators because many people may be afraid to speak up in their presence. Participants may refrain from sharing their own thoughts, especially if they conflict with the senior leader’s. Also, if a senior team member is expected to participate in the meeting, it’s not a good idea for them to automatically be given the role of facilitator; it’s too difficult to be both a fully functioning participant and a good facilitator.

POINTER

One of the most important roles of a facilitator is to draw out quiet participants and prevent other participants from dominating the discussion. To draw out quiet participants, consider:

- asking by name if the person has anything to contribute
- recognizing when someone has made a contribution
- asking a question and having everyone respond to it at one time.

To keep someone from dominating the discussion, interrupt gently and ask someone else for an opinion, or remind everyone of the time limits on agenda items.

If a senior leader isn't appropriate, the facilitator could be someone else within the company; choosing someone internal means the facilitator may understand the issues more quickly, saving time and money. In fact, companies often already have several individuals who have natural facilitation skills or have had facilitation training, although that might not be their primary job. This works if the internal facilitator is not part of the team who is meeting. Someone who is involved with the content of the meeting may have a hard time remaining neutral and may allow team members to go down a rabbit hole rather than sticking to the agenda.

If the outcome of the meeting is critical, time is of the essence, an unbiased leader is needed, and the team's full cooperation is necessary, a professional facilitator will bring the skills to get the job done. However, professional facilitators will require more time to learn about the company and the context for the meeting. Professional facilitators will also add an expense.

What Types of Meetings Require Facilitation?

There are a variety of meeting types, several of which produce better outcomes when a facilitator, either internal or external, is used.

- **Standard weekly meetings**—Typically, these meetings do not require a facilitator. Highly functional teams, however, may appoint rotating facilitators, where the role shifts from one team member to the next each week.
- **Decision-making meetings**—These are also known as “critical outcome meetings,” where the decisions or next steps affect the company in a major way. Use a facilitator, though preferably not someone who has a stake in the game, to keep the conversation productive and reach a decision with maximum buy-in from the group.
- **A meeting where neutrality is important**—As objective moderators, good facilitators can quickly earn the group's trust. Their objectivity also increases participation from the group and buy-in for the final decision.

- **Informational meetings**—If the goal of the meeting is to present information to a group of people quickly, rather than to gather input or gain buy-in, a facilitator is typically not necessary.
- **Creative meetings**—Sometimes a group of people need to get creative to solve a problem that has no obvious solution. A good facilitator will assist with brainstorming, managing the range of ideas created, and keep processes on track to eventually reach a conclusion.

Facilitators can be used for one-time meetings, or they may be called on to lead a series of meetings. Sometimes it takes more than one meeting to achieve the goal; a facilitator could meet with the same group of people several times or could meet with different groups of people all involved in the same issue. Although a wide range of circumstances benefit from a facilitator, all require the same skills.

Now that you have an appreciation of what a facilitator does and the responsibilities that accompany the role, use Tool 1-2 to evaluate your effectiveness and identify areas in which you can enhance your skills.

TOOL 1-2

FACILITATOR SELF-ASSESSMENT

Use this self-assessment to measure your readiness for the various roles of a facilitator and to identify areas for improvement. Using the scale provided, indicate to what extent you fulfill each of the roles listed below. For areas rated 1 or below, identify specific actions you plan to take to improve in that area.

- 0 = not at all
- 1 = to a very little extent
- 2 = to some extent
- 3 = to a great extent
- 4 = to a very great extent

Role	Rating					Actions
	0	1	2	3	4	
Starts sessions on time.						
Shares objectives with the group.						
Maintains a positive, professional demeanor.						
Remains neutral.						
Manages the time to ensure all agenda topics are covered in the allotted time.						
Creates and sustains an environment conducive for discussions and idea generation.						
Helps participants to understand key concepts as they relate to the topics being discussed.						
Listens actively.						
Develops group cohesiveness.						
Uses a variety of questioning techniques to generate discussion and facilitate deeper thinking.						
Shares experiences that enhance credibility.						
Helps others to identify problems.						
Deals constructively with disruptive behaviors.						
Protects group members from personal attacks.						
Helps a group achieve consensus.						
Promotes the development of action and follow-up plans.						
Stops on time.						

The Next Step

The next step in the process involves working with the client or primary contact to clarify the business objectives and the goals for the facilitation session, and to create an initial agenda.

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