Facilitation occurs when a neutral third party uses his or her skills to improve the way a group identifies problems, solves problems, and makes decisions.

**What is a facilitator?**
A facilitator is typically a third party person brought in to work with a group to improve the group’s effectiveness. However, a facilitator is not always a neutral third party. The facilitator may also be a member of the group who has agreed to facilitate and remain neutral on the topic. A facilitator is someone who is:

- neutral to the issue or topic of discussion and the solutions reached
- acceptable to all members of the group
- focused on improving group process

To help clarify what a facilitator is, it might be best to discuss what a facilitator is not.

**A facilitator is not someone who:**

- is involved in the task or issue being examined.
- is a clerical or errand person.
- is able to freely express their opinion on the issue or topic.
- has a stake in the decisions made.
- has decision making authority in the group.
- is an arbitrator or judge (the group itself is responsible for the decisions it makes and for resolving its own conflicts).
What is the role of a facilitator?

A facilitator is different from the typical leader or chairperson. The leader/chairperson decides how things will be done and what will be done. The facilitator however asks, suggests, reminds, and keeps track of the main agenda. Generally, the facilitator is there to see that all members feel free to participate and that they are listened to and accepted. A facilitator provides just enough structure so that interaction between people does not interfere with the topic on the agenda.

Although facilitators often deal with conflict and are involved in some type of negotiations, they are not typically mediators. Facilitators and mediators share many of the same skills and techniques but they have different objectives. The objective of mediation is to help the parties negotiate a settlement to a particular conflict. A facilitator’s objective is to help the group improve its process for solving problems and reaching decisions to meet its goals. The objectives for facilitation and mediation can be described by using the metaphor of an auto mechanic. A facilitator guides you through the mechanical techniques of how to repair your own car, a mediator is the mechanic who repairs the car for you.

A facilitator helps establish effective group behavior through ground rules, an agenda, and various group process techniques. Ground rules are explicit rules that the group agrees to follow to help them formulate effective behavior. Through the use of various tools and techniques, a facilitator helps build trust among group members and helps members learn effective behavior for improved group process.

A Facilitator Should:

- **Remain Neutral**
  - Keep silent on content issues.
  - Stay emotionally uninvolved.
  - Become invisible when the group is managing itself.
- Stay out of the spotlight.
Manage the Process

✔ Spend plenty of time thinking through what you will be doing as facilitator.
✔ Follow the agenda and established ground rules.
✔ Be comfortable in your role as facilitator.
✔ Periodically check for decision making.
✔ Strive for agreement among group members.

Keep Members on Topic

✔ Keep the discussion focused.
✔ Periodically repeat the topic under discussion.
✔ Allow members to finish their point without interruptions.
✔ Use the agenda.

Summarize

✔ Periodically summarize what group members have said.
✔ Encourage members to develop their ideas further.
✔ Connect related comments (“it sounds like your adding to what Bob said”).
✔ Check periodically to see when the group is ready to make a decision.

State Problems Constructively

✔ Allow the group to identify and discuss the problem before jumping to solutions.
✔ Separate people from the problem.
✔ Phrase the problem back to the group from the discussion.
✔ Provide problem clarification through questions not answers.
Set the Tone
✓ Establish and use ground rules.
✓ Protect group members from personal attacks.
✓ Accept statements reflecting both feelings and content.
✓ Direct the “traffic” of conversation.
✓ Be a model of effective group behavior.
✓ Be patient.
✓ Be flexible.
✓ Enjoy yourself.

What are some necessary skills for a facilitator?

Facilitators need a variety of skills to fill their role and meet their tasks. Although no list can completely outline all the skills needed as a facilitator, the following is a list of key, necessary skills a facilitator should have when working with groups.

1. Active listening
   - Identify similarities and differences among statements.
   - Repeat back what members say (“what I hear you saying is...”).
   - Observe and remember behavior and conversations.
   - Identify assumptions in statements.

2. Questioning
   - Ask open ended questions to stimulate discussion.
   - Ask “why” statements for issue and interest clarification.
   - Ask “how” statements for solution clarification.
3. Problem Solving
- Analyze and synthesize issues.
- Define the problem.
- Determine the cause.
- Consider solution scenario alternatives.
- Select the best alternative.
- Set realistic goals within a reasonable time frame.

4. Resolving Conflicts
- Listen to understand various perspectives.
- Focus on interest, Not positions (reframe statements to ask why, how, why not, what, and who).
- Allow emotions to be vented without personal attacks.
- Define what is meant by consensus (not a perfect decision but one you can live with).
- Build agreements simply, slowly, and start small.

5. Inclusiveness
- Encourage team members to participate.
- Ensure all voices are heard.
- Provide support and encouragement to members.
- Understand multiple perspectives.

6. Flexibility
- Monitor and change one’s own behavior while working with a group.
- Adjust to group needs.

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References and Additional Sources


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