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The Art of Facilitation

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What is Facilitation?

As organisations get to grips with what empowerment really means so the thinking about the skills required to manage is undergoing a significant reassessment. No longer can managers rely on traditional command and control structures for their authority; instead they need to find a different approach, one that will enable them to manage effectively in different situations -in one-to-one settings, in teams and with clients.

These new skills that managers are having to learn can be described as facilitation skills. The dictionary definition of a facilitator is: 'one who makes easier; one who assists the progress of another'. However facilitation should not be seen as some softly, softly approach to working with others. On the contrary it can be, and often is, extremely challenging. But the emphasis of facilitation is on collaboration and co-operation and it is this focus which has attracted the interest of trainers and managers as they look for ways to improve working practices.

This chapter is aimed at all trainers and managers whose objective it is to encourage others to learn and work together. In it we propose to look at the principles of facilitation, what it means to work as a facilitator before going on to consider how facilitation can be applied in practice.

The Principles of Facilitation

Facilitation is the way you lead, guide and follow a group or an individual -be that as a teacher, a trainer, a manager, a consultant or a supervisor. To achieve excellence as a facilitator you need to adapt your facilitation so that it is appropriate to the aims, the needs, the level of experience, the duration and the context of the people you are facilitating.

Put in another way, managing or training is no longer seen to be effective when you are relying solely on getting people what to do and how to do it. The focus of the trainer or manager who uses facilitation is to help people be self-directed. This does not mean, however, that you are giving away your power. Rather it means you need to be ready and able to adapt your style in order to help the person or group achieve its purpose.

As a facilitator you need to be aware of the role you have for the situation you are in (ie are you team leader, consultant, teacher?) and then decide which of the three modes of authority to use. The three modes that facilitators need to utilize in this respect are:



1. Hierarchy

This is where you as the facilitator direct the learning process or the group meeting. You exercise your power over it and do things for the group. You lead from the front by thinking and acting on behalf of the individual and the group. In hierarchical mode, the manager is in absolute control and everybody knows and understands this. Hierarchically managed businesses have a clear (explicit), or unstated way of doing things, usually the manager's. The danger of operating solely from this mode is that the manager may not be using the expertise contained within the team, may be unable or unwilling to allow team members to take any responsibility, and will therefore stifle initiative.

2. Co-operation

This is where you share your power and manage from your knowledge and experience. You work towards enabling people and teams to become more self-directing by conferring with them. In co-operative mode the manager and the team make decisions together. Essentially they meet to make decisions as peers, everyone has an equal say, and responsibility is shared and owned by all team members.

Many managers say they manage co-operatively, but when it comes to the crunch they make the decisions themselves. When this happens the manager has moved back into hierarchical mode. There will of course be occasions when this is absolutely necessary, but many of these 'flips' back into hierarchy are driven by the manager's anxiety rather than need. The co-operative mode makes full use of the manager's and the team's expertise.

3. Autonomy

This is where you respect the total autonomy of the individual or the group. You do not do things for them or with them; rather you give them freedom to find their own way, exercising their own judgement, without any intervention by you.

In autonomous mode, the manager gives authority and responsibility to the team to make decisions, and agrees to abide by the decisions the team makes. This mode makes full use of the expertise contained within the team, implies a high level of trust, and demands maturity and responsibility from both the manager and team.

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There is, of course, no right mode. The effective facilitator is able to move between all three modes effortlessly, depending on the needs of the situation. Although there will always be situations which demand hierarchical management because of the nature of the job or some current crisis, effective businesses are managed hierarchically only when hierarchy is appropriate. So far so good, but there is another important aspect of facilitation which concerns both the use of these styles and how they are applied in learning situations. The following dimensions of facilitation will help readers to identify their approach when working with others.

The dimensions of facilitation

Planning

This is the goal-oriented aspect of facilitation, the 'what to do' rather than the 'how to do it'. The question that facilitators need to have in mind here is how the individual or group can meet its objectives.

In hierarchical mode the manager may simply impose planning decisions without consultation. In the process they may, or may not, have sought relevant information and conducted research. Equally, facilitators acting in this mode might provide supporting reasons for adopting a particular plan and, again, they might not.

In co-operative mode the facilitator will negotiate the planning process with the individual or the group. In the autonomous mode the facilitator defines with the group the goals and objectives but thereafter all planning is undertaken by group members on their own.



Meaning

This is the knowledge aspect of facilitation and enables individuals and groups to understand what is going on and to make sense of their experience.

Operating from the hierarchical position facilitators may, for example, decide to tell an individual or group why a certain change initiative is happening and what it means. Informing in this way may make sense from the facilitator's perspective and their interpretation might even have some truth to it but it will be limiting since it is based on just one perspective.

In co-operative mode the facilitator might prompt the individual or group to consider for themselves what change might mean to their working lives and they might help the group to make sense of what is happening by, for example, sharing helpful models or personal experiences.

In autonomous mode the facilitator leaves the individual or group to arrive at their own conclusions but this also has its dangers especially when an individual or group does not feel it has enough information to make sense of what is happening. In such cases the manager may find people feeling abandoned and demoralized rather than empowered.

Confronting

This is where the facilitator challenges the individual or the group and it is here we see that facilitation is far from being an approach that relies on being nice to others. Confronting others is all about tackling resistance to change, about raising awareness of blind spots and helping individuals and groups to face things that they have been avoiding. Hierarchically the facilitator might challenge someone head on about their behaviour by highlighting it directly or perhaps by asking confronting questions.

The process of feedback is often used as the mechanism through which co-operation is used. The individual or group agrees to the feedback given by the facilitator, they look at the reality of the challenge together and use it as a basis for learning or development.

In autonomous mode the facilitator will typically be working with a high trust group or perhaps as a mentor/coach with an individual. It is in these contexts, where the individual or group feels safe and supported, that people will start to challenge themselves.



Feeling

Organizations often have taboos around expressing feelings and it is in this dimension that the facilitative manager/trainer has to be aware of their own emotional responses and those of the people they are working with. This is the area which concerns sensing and managing the mood of the group.

Hierarchically, you can see trainers acting in the feeling dimension when they use energizing games and techniques to try and alter the feeling state of the group. In beginner groups, facilitators have to be especially sensitive to those times when members are suppressing feeling. In such cases it is important to guide people to identify, own and accept their own feelings.

Co-operatively this can be done by facilitators prompting individuals or groups to share what they are feeling and by sharing their own views about the importance of feelings. Meanwhile the autonomous group or individual will spontaneously express and celebrate in their own way at their own chosen time.

Structuring

This is the formal aspect of facilitation that deals with achievement of aims and objectives. It involves methods of learning and the ways of working how they are to be structured.

The modes of authority that a facilitator can adopt for this dimension are similar to that of planning. The facilitator may decide hierarchically what they as a group will do, and when they will do it, without reference to anyone else. Alternatively they may work co-operatively with the individual or group, drawing from them their ideas and preferences or, in autonomous mode, encourage the individual or group to set up their own self-directed experience.



Valuing

Here we are talking about the integrity aspect of facilitation -the ability of the facilitator to build trust and to create a supportive climate which honours and respects the individuals he or she is working with. The aim here is to build a climate in which people can be genuine, in which they feel free and willing to disclose their reality, and which keeps them in touch with their true needs and interests.

The facilitator who works out of hierarchy here can achieve much by setting clear ground rules and by expressing positive feelings. Such expression has to be authentic, however, and it requires that the facilitator is in touch with his or her own genuine thoughts and feelings. However, the whole issue of valuing implies sharing responsibility with others -so for the climate to be maintained the facilitator will also have to work co-operatively. Working in co-operative mode the facilitator will honour the choice that others make and by prompting others to adopt nurturing, validative and supportive behaviour will help build a valuing climate.

It may well be the facilitator's aim that after some time working with either the individual or the group he or she is able to work in autonomous mode. This is where the individuals concerned have beliefs and attitudes which affirm and respect others and themselves.

These then are the six dimensions and facilitative trainers and managers will be conscious of when each of these dimensions pertain and the choice they have about how to exercise the appropriate authority in order to be effective. We will now go onto some of the underpinning qualities of facilitation.

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Building awareness and skill

Managers and trainers who want to become adept facilitators need to start by working with themselves. The principle at stake here is that you can only facilitate others in areas in which you yourself have explored.

To know oneself is, of course, an ongoing endeavour and it requires us to commit to ongoing development on all levels -mental, emotional, physical and spiritual. It is important to note, however, that this does not mean we are aspiring to be perfect in any of these areas but rather that we are comfortable with who we are. To borrow the transactional analysis (TA) model, it is not about 'You're OK and I'm not OK' but rather working towards 'I'm OK and you're OK' or, if you like, working towards a genuine acceptance of yourself.

Some of the questions potential facilitators might ask themselves here might focus on how comfortable they feel with their body, with their thoughts, with their feelings and with their beliefs? The issue is not to feel as if you have everything under control but rather to know yourself well enough to know where you feel solid and where you feel less sure of yourself. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, their peculiar quirks and their private thoughts. The effective facilitator, however, will have explored more about themselves and understood how this affects their behaviour.

Developing this level of self-awareness is important for facilitation because it enables us to feel comfortable with other people. If, for example, there are aspects of ourselves that we do not like then we will find it hard to accept other people who display the same traits?

This aspect of learning to accept ourselves so that we can be more available to others is often both new and refreshing to people who come to facilitation. In challenging ourselves to be more 'who we really are' we start to liberate ourselves from our prejudices and genuinely open ourselves up to others. Such an attitude is essential to facilitating others.

Another key underpinning quality that facilitators need to develop is the art of attentive listening; 'Listening is much more than hearing. Hearing is the auditory information. Listening is an intellectual and emotional process that decodes physical, intellectual and emotional input in a search for meaning and understanding. Effective listening occurs when the listener correctly understands the sender's meaning' (see Mulligan, et al.,1988).

What we learn here is that the ability to listen is a crucial component of interpersonal relationships. For example, how do you feel when you are not listened to, when you are misunderstood, or when what you say is forgotten?

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As a facilitator listening well and attentively is a powerful way of 'being' with another person. It honours more than just the words of the speaker but rather helps people to feel as though they have really been seen and valued. The trick is to listen to someone as though they are the most important person in the world, which, at the time they are speaking to you is, of course, true. If you want to develop into an effective listener then you might begin with this checklist:

1. Have a reason for listening
2. Demonstrate skill in giving attention
3. Use silences and infrequent questions
4. Encourage the other person to talk
5. Try not to interrupt the other person
6. Suspend judgement
7. Allow yourself time to think and wait before responding
8. Be able to repeat what the speaker says
9. Be able to rephrase in your own words what was said
10. Check that you have understood.

The other primary skill which a facilitator needs to develop is that of facilitative speaking, Making skilful interventions arises from first having listened attentively. For the skilled facilitator there are then a range of possibilities. These include:

- The appropriate use of questions which encourage further examination of a particular issue or which challenge an individual or group about its behaviour or attitudes.
- Suggestions which might, for example, help an individual to look at an issue from a different angle.
- Reflections which throw light on the content of what has been said.
- Observations which might notice what is going on inside you the facilitator, might focus on what is happening in the group or highlight events happening outside of the room.
- Imaginal input such as the use of storytelling which has the impact of engaging the imagination or putting a different framework on what has been said.
- Attributive interpretations where some psychological meaning is attributed to a piece of behaviour in terms of motives, desire, emotions or thoughts.
- Feedback which provides the learner with the opportunity to check reality and also invites reflection

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It is important to note that these skills of building awareness, listening and speaking sound desperately simple but require great attention. Facilitation cannot be learned overnight, it requires commitment and needs to be practised and honed over time.

Facilitation in action

Facilitation is a useful skill for trainers and managers to learn whatever the situation in which they find themselves. In times of change it is more and more important that people find the flexibility of attitude and behaviour that allows them to respond to new and emerging conditions. However, there are a number of workplace processes and occasions where facilitation is an especially appropriate management response:

Mentoring

A useful definition of mentoring is that provided by David Clutterbuck (see chapter 24 Gower Handbook of Training & Development, Third Edition) when he talks of it being 'off-line help by one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking'. The mentor has a role in this respect of helping the mentoree grasp the significance of what is happening in their work and their life.

The potential of mentoring has been recognized by many organizations but often there is little formal training given to mentors in how to be effective in the role. The use of facilitation skills which emphasize how to support, challenge and enable the development of others can provide a model for prospective mentors.