

Facilitation—What Is It?

Facilitation comes from the French word *facile*, which means to make easy. It is the process of helping groups accomplish their tasks.

Facilitate means “to make easy.”

“The facilitator’s job is to serve the group. One good measure of effective facilitation is that the group feels they’ve done the work themselves. The facilitator impacts and guides the process but does not give input on the content of a meeting – that comes from group members.”¹

The Facilitator’s Role²

- Plan and design the meeting process in collaboration with the group.
- Help everyone get acquainted and feel welcome.
- Clarify the purpose of the meeting, the desired outcomes, the process to be used and the roles of each person.
- Remain neutral.
- Help set ground rules.
- Draw out opinions and encourage all members to participate.
- Clarify communication between people.
- Keep the meeting on task.
- Provide a safe place for creative ideas.
- Listen actively.
- Manage difficult behaviors.



- Name conflict when it arises and guide the group through the differences.
- Encourage the group.
- Summarize the progress of the meeting at key points.
- Guide the group in coming to conclusion, agreement and clarity.

under discussion. Use questions and suggestions to offer ideas that come to mind. Never impose opinions on the group.

Listen actively – look people in the eye, use attentive body language and paraphrase what

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Facilitation Core Practices

As a facilitator, you have a number of skills that are important to helping the group achieve its goals. These are known as *core practices*. During any meeting a facilitator uses all or most of these practices.

Stay neutral on content – your job is to focus on the *process* role and avoid the temptation of offering opinions about the topic

What you will learn:

- What the facilitator’s role is and why it is important
- What a facilitator’s core beliefs and practices are
- How to behave and strategize to help groups succeed
- How to use flip charts effectively

¹ Kelsey, Dee and Pam Plumb (1997). *Great Meetings! How to Facilitate Like a Pro*. Portland, ME: Hanson Park Press.

² Kelsey and Plumb

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they are saying. Always make eye contact with people while they speak, when paraphrasing what they have just said and when summarizing their key ideas. Also use eye contact to let people know that they can speak next, and to invite the quiet ones in the group to participate.

Ask questions—this is the most important tool you possess. Questions test assumptions, invite participation, gather information, and elicit new ideas.

Paraphrase to clarify—this involves repeating what people say to make sure they know they are being heard, to let others hear their points a second time and to clarify key ideas.

Synthesize ideas—invite people to comment and build on each other's thoughts to ensure that ideas recorded on the flip chart represent the group's thinking.

This helps to build commitment and consensus.

Stay on track—set time guidelines for each discussion. If the group goes off the topic, help them get back on track.

Give and receive feedback—periodically “hold up a mirror” to help the group “see” itself so it can make corrections. Also ask for and accept feedback about the facilitation you are providing.

Test assumptions—bring out in the open and clarify the assumptions people are making so that they are clearly understood by everyone. These assumptions may even need to be challenged before a group can explore new ground.

Collect ideas—keep track of both new ideas and final decisions. Make clear and accurate summaries on a flipchart so everyone can see the notes. Notes are brief and concise, and must

reflect what the group members actually said, rather than your interpretation of what they said.

Summarize clearly—an effective facilitator listens attentively to everything that is said and then offers concise and timely summaries. Summarize when the group discussion has come to a stop, or to end a discussion when things seem to be wrapping up.

Facilitation Behaviors and Strategies

The other set of facilitator skills that you have are your behaviors and strategies. These behaviors help the group succeed. An effective facilitator will leave a group convinced that “We did it ourselves!”

Be informed—successful facilitators always gather data about the group. This helps the facilitator fully understand both the group and their needs.

Be optimistic—facilitators try to focus on what can be achieved and to draw the best from each group member.

Be consensual—facilitation is fundamentally a consensus-building process. Facilitators always strive to create outcomes that reflect the ideas of all participants equally.

Be flexible—effective facilitators always have a plan for meetings, yet at the same time are ready to toss it aside and change direction if that is what is needed.

Be understanding—facilitators need to understand that every group member is doing the best they can at the moment.

What Does a Facilitator Believe?

All facilitators believe that two heads are better than one and that to do a good job, people need to be taken seriously and play a part in whatever they're doing.

To be an effective facilitator, your role is enhanced when you believe that:

- People are intelligent, capable and want to do the right thing
- Groups can make better decisions than any one person can make alone
- Everyone's opinion is of equal value, regardless of position
- People are more committed to the ideas and plans they have helped to create
- Group members can and will act responsibly in being accountable for their decisions
- Groups can manage their own conflicts, behaviors and relationships if they are given the right tools and training
- The process of working in groups, if well designed and honestly applied, can be trusted to achieve results

A facilitator puts the group members first. Members decide what the goals are, make the decisions, implement the action plans and hold themselves accountable for achieving results. The facilitator's contribution is to offer the right methods and tools at the right time.

Taking the mystery out of the flip chart

A flip chart may look innocent enough. Yet these three-legged beasts can trip you up, make your handwriting look like kindergarten scrawl and make even familiar spelling impossible to recall. Here are some definite dos and don'ts about flip charts.



Do

- Write down exactly what members say. Check to make sure that what is written captures the meaning expressed.
- Use verbs and make phrases fairly complete. Always be sure the flip chart can convey meaning, even to someone who is not at the meeting.
- Talk and write at the same time. This is necessary in order to maintain a good pace.
- Move around. If an important point is being made, walk closer to the person who is talking so you can better pay attention.
- Write in black, blue or some other dark colors. Use different colors to signify a change of idea or action. Use fairly large letters so it can be read from the back of the room.
- Post flip chart sheets around the room so that people can keep track of what has been discussed.
- Check out ahead of time what type of masking tape can be used on the walls.

Don't

- Write down your personal interpretations of things. These are the group's notes. If unsure, ask the group "What should I write down?"
- Worry about spelling. If you make a fuss about spelling, it will inhibit members from getting up and taking a turn at facilitating.
- Hide behind the flip chart or talk to it. Unless you are writing, stand squarely beside it, facing the group when reading back notes.
- Stand passively at the flip chart while a long discussion is going on without writing anything down. Ideas don't need to be in complete sentences before recording them. Make note of key words and ideas.
- Use script unless you have great handwriting. Avoid pale pastel markers. They are hard to see from any distance.
- Keep flipcharts piled in one place so that the group does not have access to the group's work.

Be alert—Facilitators are skilled people watchers. They pay close attention to group dynamics and notice what is going on.

Be firm—Good facilitation is not a passive activity. It often takes a substantial level of assertiveness to keep people and activities on track. Facilitators need to be ready to step in and direct the process if the situation calls for it.

Be unobtrusive—The facilitator does as little talking as possible. The group members are doing most of the talking. The facilitator says only enough to give instructions, stop arguments, keep things on track and sum up.

Establishing Ground Rules

Ground rules are guidelines developed by the group as to how they will work together to accomplish the task. They describe positive behaviors that need to be present for the group to be effective.

For ground rules to work they have to be important to the group, limited in number and supported by each group member. They also need to be posted for all members to see and refer to during the group task. Check in with the group to help them see if they are following them.

Here are a few sample ground rules to consider:

- Share air time.
- Speak for yourself, not on

behalf of others.

- Listen to understand.
- Take responsibility for what you need in the meeting.
- Encourage everyone to participate.
- Stay on track with the agenda.
- Begin and end on time.
- Avoid distracting side conversations.

Summary: Seek Observation and Feedback

Invite another person to observe you while you are facilitating a meeting. Ask them to comment about the actions and behaviors listed on page four.

Use this feedback to make a list of your current skills and the skills you most want to

strengthen. Refer to the references and resources listed at the end of this publication to learn more about the skills you want to strengthen. You may choose to observe and mentor with other facilitators to strengthen your skills. Also, see the rest of the University of Maine Cooperative Extension *GroupWorks* fact sheets, available online at www.umext.maine.edu/publications/catalog.htm, or by calling (800) 287-0274 (in Maine).

Reading & Resources

Justice, Tom and David W. Jamieson (1999). *The Facilitator's Fieldbook*. New York: HRD Press.

Kaner, Sam with Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk and Duane Berger (1996). *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*. Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers.

Schwarz, Roger M. (2002). *The Skilled Facilitator*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This adaptation was prepared by Louise Franck Cyr, Extension community development specialist. Editor: Kyle McCaskill Graphic designer: Cindy Eves-Thomas

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Facilitation at a Glance Chart

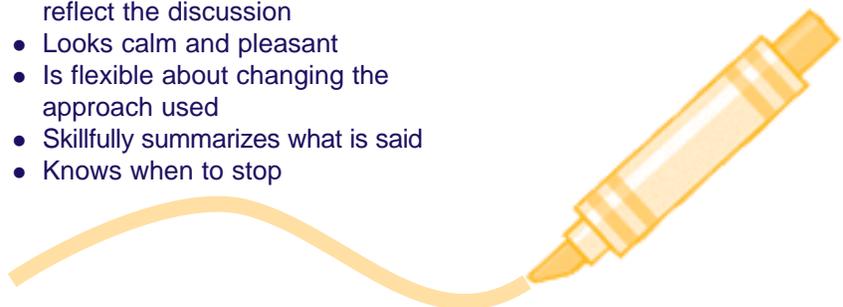
To start a facilitation	During a facilitation	To end a facilitation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -welcome group members -introduce members -explain your role -clarify session goal -confirm the agenda -explain the process -set time frames for agenda items -appoint time keeper and a recorder of meeting decisions -start the discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -ask "How's this going?" -check the pace: too fast, too slow? -check whether the techniques are working -take the pulse of the group members -summarize periodically and at end of session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -help group members make a clear statement of what was decided -develop clear next steps with dates and names -round up leftover items -help create next agenda -clarify follow-up process -evaluate the session

Facilitative Behaviors That Help

- Listens actively
- Maintains eye contact
- Helps identify needs
- Gets buy-in
- Surfaces concerns
- Defines problem
- Brings everyone into the discussion
- Uses good body language and tone of voice
- Paraphrases continuously
- Provides useful feedback
- Monitors and adjusts the process
- Asks relevant probing questions
- Keeps an open attitude
- Manages conflict well
- Takes a problem-solving approach
- Stays focused on process
- Captures ideas
- Makes accurate notes that reflect the discussion
- Looks calm and pleasant
- Is flexible about changing the approach used
- Skillfully summarizes what is said
- Knows when to stop

Facilitative Behaviors That Hinder

- Oblivious to group needs
- No follow-up on concerns
- Listens poorly
- Strays into content
- Loses track of key ideas
- Takes poor notes
- Ignores conflicts
- Provides no alternatives for structuring the discussion
- Gets defensive
- Puts people down
- No paraphrasing
- Lets a few people dominate
- Never asks "How are we doing?"
- Tries to be the center of attention
- Lets the group get sidetracked
- Projects a poor image
- Uses negative or sarcastic tone
- Talks too much
- Doesn't know when to stop



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