"Developing Your Group Facilitation Skills"

By

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1. CORE PRINCIPLES FOR FACILITATORS

Knowledge is not simply a collection of static entities or information, waiting to be imparted or transferred to the learners by some "experts". Newly acquired information or skills become "knowledge" only when learners are engaged in an active process of exploration and experimentation, thereby creating new meanings and lasting relevance within the context of the learner's own world.

The first priority of a facilitator is to create a safe, supportive and <u>nurturing</u> environment for all learners to explore and experiment. The following key principles, when they are fully alive within a group process, will create transformative impact for the learners. These principles revolve around a "learner-centred" approach, where the concerns and needs of the learners propel the learning process.

Democracy – "We All Play a Part..."
All activities within a group should be "learner directed" - learning goals are shaped by the facilitator and the participants collectively; the agenda is flexible and open to changes or modification to meet the learners' emerging concerns and needs. Practically, this suggests the need to create space in your group session so that participants' needs can be explored.

Responsibility – "Each Role is Unique…"

Each person is ultimately responsible for his or her own life, experiences and behaviours. This includes taking responsibility for one's own learning. A facilitator is responsible for the learning plan, selection of content, management of process at the session. The learner is responsible for respecting other learners and the process itself. It is essential for a facilitator to actively engage participants - interactive activities of various kinds throughout a session will be the best program-design choice to achieve this goal.

Cooperation – "Together, We Tug at The Problem…"

The facilitator and participants work together to achieve their collective learning goals. For every group activity, differences of worldview, variance of styles, needs and expectations often create unproductive conflicts and contestations. Facilitator should help the group to adopt a "problem solving" frame-of-mind. Every obstacle should be presented or reframed as a collective challenge and endeavour: "we are all in this together to achieve our common goal…"

Honesty – "Be Truthful…"

As facilitator, you must know and honour your limitations and not attempt to go beyond your capabilities. Also, it is very important to know your own "hot buttons" and maintain clarity on your personal values, feelings, concerns and priorities in working with the group. You should set the tone for an expectation of honesty and respect from all participants. When appropriate, feel free to represent yourself fairly and impartially.

Egalitarianism – "Equal Chances for All…"

Each member has something valuable to contribute to the group and is provided a fair chance to do so. As a facilitator, you must respect the reciprocal relationship between you and the learners – the belief that you can learn as much from the participants as they can from you. The group needs to believe and trust the fact that collectively, we have the ability to discover the 'answers'.

Be Purposefully Positive – "Scenes of Success, Growth and Possibilities..."

In the 21st century, the world is permeated with cynicism and negativity. Metaphorically, in much of today's world, the "glass" is often seen as being "half empty." Indeed, this cynicism is taken as an immutable "reality", and unfortunately, those who approach life and human affairs from a perspective of the "glass is half full" are labelled as "naïve" and "unrealistic". We propose that the best learning environment is one in which participants believe in their own abilities and power. By focusing on images and experiences of the possible (positive) rather than scenes of "gap" or "deficit" (negative), the learning experience becomes a journey of discovery, transformation and empowerment.

Have Fun – "Joyous Learning..."

The erroneous assumption that productivity is incompatible with "having fun" derives from a set of retrogressive pedagogical assumptions. Researches and practices in progressive adult education have convincingly demonstrated that people learn best when all human faculties are fully stimulated and nurtured. Optimal results are often achieved by combining t*hinking, listening, talking (sharing), and doing in an atmosphere of fun and relaxation.*

2. WHAT MAKES A GOOD FACILITATOR?

Metaphorically, a facilitator is like a conductor of an orchestra – everyone will take the lead from you. If you are enthusiastic, your group will be high in energy; if you are indifferent so will your group be. Take the plunge and have fun! Be patient with your own progress. The more you practice, the better you will become.

The role of the facilitator within a group is…

☐ To keep the group focused on the task

☐ To stimulate the group to explore

☐ To involve and encourage everyone in the group – focus on what people "can do" rather than "can't do"

☐ To listen and contribute helpful insights

☐ To remind the group what has been uncovered thus far...

☐ To create a culture of respect and safety for everyone.

A good group facilitator…

☐ Has a good command of all training materials

☐ Understands and is able to articulate all the hidden key messages of an activity – clarity of learning outcomes/ messaging

☐ Speeds up or slows down a group as required

☐ Protects others in the group from ridicule

☐ Is aware of different learning styles

☐ Is aware of other people's body language

☐ Is knowledgeable about basic principles and practices of adult learning

☐ Is flexible and allows people space to discuss things

☐ Doesn't feel that they need to be the expert with all the answers – "park your ego"

☐ Knows their own strengths and weaknesses – "hot buttons".

A facilitator is not…

☐ A lecturer

☐ A teacher.

3. USEFUL NOTES AND CHECKLIST FOR FACILITATORS

a. Before the group arrives:

☐ Check the seating arrangement and working condition of all equipments. Arrange the seating in a circle/ around tables/ U shape - make sure everyone can see each other. Adopt physical set-up that breaks down hierarchy and barriers

☐ If working with other facilitators, agree on an arrangement that allows for a clear but flexible division of labour before you begin

☐ Spread yourselves out amongst the group, do not all huddle together and hide behind a lectern. If microphone is required, try to arrange a cordless lapel type - this will allow you the freedom to pace the room. Be ready to show participants that everyone is important in the group

☐ Give yourself pep talks begin the session: Why are you here? What can you offer? What are you good at? This will ease your stage fright and refocus yourself on the task at hand.

b. When the group arrives:

☐ Welcome everyone heartily – make them feel special

☐ Introduce yourself in such a way that it "connects" with your audience, offering attractive articulation of expected learning outcomes

☐ Try to observe the diversity of people in your group: who are shy, confident, jokers, etc. by their actions

☐ Design powerful introduction – "catch your participants and never let them go!"

☐ Design memorable wrap-up – people should leave the session with something to remember

☐ Give clear instructions about what you will be doing with the group during the workshop or group discussion

☐ Set ground rules or better still, gather "inspirations for positive interactions" from everyone in the group and post on flipchart for all to see.

c. 'Opening up' a topic:

☐ Make your work easy – think about who you are going to start with to get the discussion going, choose someone who is chatty

☐ If someone doesn't want to speak, don't force him or her

☐ Avoid questions that can only be answered 'yes' or 'no'

☐ You might want to ask people to work together in pairs during an exercise if everyone is reluctant to speak or try a 'Round Robin' where everyone takes turn to speak

☐ Use people's first names where possible but don't put them on the spot.

d. During the Discussion:

☐ Know your own body language and that of the group members

☐ Encourage people to ask questions if they don't understand something

☐ Stimulate the group – encourage them through positive re-enforcement

☐ Use paraphrasing whenever possible to clarify or highlight important messages

☐ Avoid direct confrontation when it is not necessary

☐ Try to maintain a relaxed atmosphere and have fun whenever possible

☐ Remember: Silence is not always a bad thing!

e. Using Positive Body Language

☐ Respect people's personal space

☐ Use appropriate eye contact – speaker, other individual, whole group

☐ Demonstrate "open" body language – for example: do not cross your arms

☐ Observe other people's body language and make it your own, especially working with youth. This will help to improve rapport, we relate best to those who are "closer" to us

☐ Show that you are listening. Keep your body still and your head turned towards the other person. Avoid playing with objects, looking out the window, drumming your fingers or generally appearing distracted by other things

☐ Whenever possible, slowly pace the entire room so that it appears that you are talking to everyone

☐ Support your verbal messages with complimentary non-verbal messages

☐ Emphasize and/or describe important points with positive gestures

☐ Genuine smiles work wonders!

4. HINTS ON DISCUSSION PREPARATION

Good discussions are not often accidental. They are the result of careful planning by the facilitators. The following steps will help you to generate a good flow in facilitating a discussion.

1. Prepare yourself on the facts (topic content).
2. Prepare an outline of relevant points and a brief introduction.
3. Choose a few points and related questions in case you need to stimulate discussion.
4. Make a note to yourself to remind you of your major functions:
   a. Develop a shared understanding about objectives and outcomes
   b. Keep discussion going
   c. Facilitate maximum participation (avoid dominance by anyone)
   d. Summarize discussion

5. Verify that the physical arrangements (environment) are conducive to group discussion:
   a. Sufficient chairs around a table, or in a circle
   b. Sufficient room for subgroups to meet if required
   c.

5. "I" STATEMENTS

Within the context of North American dominant culture, one of the standard ways to encourage a group to develop trust, empathy, and a caring atmosphere is through the consistent use of "I" statements.   When employed appropriately, the "I" statement can also minimize inter-personal conflict and contestation. As a cautionary note, however, facilitators should be aware of the fact the "I" statement can also be seen as being "self-centred" or "ego centric" statement in some cultures - diverting from the collective/common goals of a group to those of an individual. Facilitator should employ this strategy with due cultural sensitivity.

The "I" messages generally have three parts, though not necessarily delivered in this order:

1. Describe the behaviour that is interfering with you (just describe don't blame): "When you don't call or come home after midnight, I feel…"

2. State your feeling about the consequences the behaviour produces for you: "I worry that something might have happened to you …."

3. State the consequence. "…. because I don't know where you are."

The facilitator should set the example by consistent use of "I" statements and by encouraging others to do the same. A verbal feedback can be made in this form:

"When you …."   "I feel…"   "because… "   Or

"I feel …."   "when you …"   "because…"

Such statements motivate others to modify or accommodate their behaviour through consideration of other's needs, without being negative or judgmental.

6. Additional Resources

<u>Books</u>

Arnold, Rick & Thomas, Barb et. al. <u>*Education for a Change*</u>, Between the Lines and Doris Marshall Institute for Education & Action, 1991.

Arnold, Rick & Bev Burke. <u>*A Popular Education Handbook*</u>, Toronto: CUSO and OISE, 1983.

Boal, Agusto. <u>*Theatre of the Oppressed*</u>, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993.

Bradford, Leland P. <u>*Making Meetings Work: A Guide for Leaders and Group Members*</u>, San Diego, CA: Pfeiffer & Co., 1976.

Brookfield, Stephen D. <u>*Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning*</u>, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988.

CUSO Development Education. <u>*Basics and Tools: A Collection of Popular Education Resources and Activities*</u>, Ottawa: CUSO, 1995.

Goad, Tom W. <u>*The First-Time Trainer: A Step-By-Step Quick Guide for Managers, Supervisors and New Training Professionals*</u>, AMA, New York, NY: 1997.

McCaskell, Tim. <u>Facilitator's Handbook</u>, Multicultural/Multiracial Residential Camp for Secondary School Students, Toronto Board of Education, 1990.

Mill, Vyril M. <u>*Activities for Trainers*</u>, University Associates, 1980.

Newstrom, John. And Scannell, W. <u>*Games Trainers Play: Experiential Learning Exercises*</u>, McGraw-Hill, NY, 1980.

<u>Websites</u>

1. Group facilitation in general:

   http://www.infodesign.com.au/ftp/Facilitation.pdf

   http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-facil.htm

   http://www.see.ed.ac.uk/~gerard/MENG/MECD/topics.html#INDEX

   http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/RoleofAFacilitator.htm

   http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/cd/other/fs9725.pdf

   http://downloads.cas.psu.edu/4h/TeambuildingFacilitation.pdf

   http://chriscorrigan.com/parkinglot/?page_id=958

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http://www.facilitationfirst.com/newsletter/0610.pdf

http://www.facilitationfirst.com/newsletter/FFtemplate.xls

2. Managing Group Dynamics

http://erc.msh.org/mainpage.cfm?file=2.2.6.htm&language=english&module=hr

http://www.wfh.org/2/docs/Publications/Hemo_Org_Resources/Monographs/HOD4_Group_Dynamics_2-edition.pdf

http://www.joanlloyd.com/Managing/Five-tips-for-managing-group-dynamics,-in-meetings.aspx

http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Managing_Groups_and_Teams/Group_Dynamics

http://www.chicagojobresource.com/career_manager_06.htm

http://www.see.ed.ac.uk/~gerard/MENG/MECD/topics.html#PFME

http://www.mgrconsulting.com/Newsletters/eNewsletter_06_03.pdf

3. Experiential Learning

http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/de/pd/instr/experi.html

http://www.eaglesflight.com/about-us/experiential-learning

http://www.fusionassociates.com/products/view/2

http://www.create-learning.com/programs/freebies.html

http://www.businessballs.com/experiential_learning.htm

http://www.create-learning.com/programs/freebies.html