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Group Facilitation

The purpose of group facilitation is to involve stakeholders in a collaborative and concurrent process in such a way that extraordinary results are obtained.

Optimum results include:

- ? High quality decisions.
- ? Ease in implementing decisions.
- ? High cooperation among participants in task performance.
- ? Stability in courses of action.
- ? “Real work” that yields progress.
- ? Everyone is aware of questions and answers.

A. Group Facilitation Roles

1. Facilitation Team Lead. A facilitator is a helper. In the group environment, the facilitator helps all members of the group achieve their desired outcomes.

Important tips and guidelines for the Lead are:

a. Liveliness. Appear expressive and animated to participants. Look alive! Do not stand in one place, even when you are in the lecture mode. Move around: walk toward the participants back away when a point has been made and stay active at all times.

b. Self-confidence. Be self-confident about the material and self-confident about your “presence.” Know and understand the material, and be clear about your role with the group. Participants recognize early in the event that you know what you are talking about and that you can and will maintain group control.

c. Sincerity. Display sincerity about the topic and about the group. Be sincere! The group will discount what you say if you are not. The old cliché applies, “I don’t care how much you know, until I know how much you care.”

d. Body language and gestures. Keep the body “open” and receptive. Keep your arms unfolded, or even extended, when that posture is comfortable. Make your gestures appropriate to the dialog. Remember that 97% of all communication is non-verbal. Your body language and gestures are important in getting and keeping attention and interest in the topic.

e. Eye contact. Maintain constant eye contact with the participants. Look at your participants! Keep your eyes moving to new people in the group at regular and reasonably rapid intervals. Maintain eye contact directly with people who have asked a

question. If you expect someone to respond, look at him/her. This action along will prompt a response, even among those hesitant to participate.

f. Emotion. Get emotional about the topic. Believe in what you are saying and show it! Emotions can show in your facial expressions, in your tone and loudness of voice, and in your behavior. Keep in mind that a constant or overly intense display of emotions is inappropriate and ineffective.

g. Voice control. Voice elements – volume, pitch, pace, and tone – should be used to enhance event presentation. Use your voice! Control these elements to the best possible effect for gaining the attention of the group. Use voice variation to call attention to points that need emphasis.

h. Smile. Smile often! Do not ignore the importance of a smile. It is difficult for participants to withhold a positive response from you when you are smiling. A smile will set the tone, and provide informal rewards for making a good point, or correctly responding to a question or need.

i. Personal experience. Punctuate the delivery of material with personal experience. Use your first hand experience! Tell the group how you did it. Tell them what resulted. Let them know that your actions were not 100% correct all the time. Let them have some insight into your learnings.

Important outcomes for the Lead are:

j. Set the stage. Set the stage for each event. Prior to, and at the outset of your event, pay attention to environmental issues such as location, lighting, seating, etc., and to the working context. At the close of each event, help the group establish clarity around their next steps.

k. Establish credibility. Establishing credibility will not only instill confidence in you as the Lead, but also the process being engaged. Speak with credibility. Use your personal experience to add realism to the topic. Call on others with experience to assist you. Groups will usually contribute their own stories and personal testimonies if you ask.

l. Maintain focus. Maintain the focus of the group. Do not let the discussions drift to related but inappropriate subjects. Keep the attention of the group directed to the most important subject, but do so without losing the vital information and energy offered on related subjects. Sense when to let the group drift, and when to pull it back to focus.

m. Stimulate participation. Encourage all group members to participate. Create an atmosphere where all members of the group participate fully and equitably in idea generation, and in the decisions of the group.

- ? **Ask questions.** Anticipate the questions on the minds of the participants, and ask them if the participants do not ask themselves. Be mentally one-step ahead of your group. Ask challenging questions, such as:
- ✍ What are your thoughts, having done this?
 - ✍ Did anyone have any insights based on what we did this morning/afternoon?
 - ✍ What exchanges did you have during the break that would be beneficial for everyone to know?
 - ✍ What are your observations?
 - ✍ Did you have any fresh insights?
 - ✍ What thought occurred to you once you had time to reflect on this experience?
 - ✍ So, what do you think?
 - ✍ Did anyone learn anything new?
 - ✍ What can you do with information like this?
 - ✍ What changes can you make in your routine now that you have this new information?
 - ✍ How will this new insight be useful to you?
 - ✍ Why will this make a difference?
 - ✍ How can you put this into practice?
 - ✍ Will you feel comfortable doing this in your organization?
 - ✍ How will people around you benefit from your new thinking?
 - ✍ Why is this important?
 - ✍ What happened?
 - ✍ What difference will knowing this make as you deal with others?
 - ✍ What's the theme running through all this?
 - ✍ Is this having utility?
- ? **Challenge the group.** Appropriately challenge the group. Be alert to a group that has produced a less-than-best product. Your challenge might be “Is this the best you can do? Would anything make it better?”
- ? **Challenge ambiguous agreement.** Challenge the decisions of the group when appropriate. While in a “group think” mode, groups will tend to make poor quality decisions. You must recognize this and challenge the group to examine the implications of those decisions.

n. Remember names. Assist the group in remembering names of group members as often as possible. As an aid, the facilitator may make a seating chart of the group early on to associate the names with position in the group. It will also identify participants sitting in “power seats” – those on the ends and middle of the group.

o. Engage appropriate group facilitation techniques. A good facilitator must be able to engage appropriate group facilitation techniques for each situation that arises. Use icebreakers and energizers, paraphrase, brainstorm, boomerang, “dance,” connect ideas, prioritize, chart implications, summarize, etc. whenever necessary. More facilitation techniques are discussed in the next section. See page 5

p. Stay out of content. Remain impartial and neutral while subjects are discussed in which you have expertise or an interest. You must be an expert only in the *process* that is taking place, and strip away any evidence of interest in the content. This is one of the most difficult tasks you, as a facilitator, will have to master.

q. Advance the process. Encourage group members to advance the process. Know the sequence model you are using, and keep the group moving through it at all times. Do not allow the group to avoid a difficult but necessary procedure.

r. Protect members. Provide protection for group members who need it. Groups turn on and “attack” their own participants from time to time. This phenomena is natural. You must provide sufficient protection for members of the group to ensure their ability to continue participating once the attack has subsided.

s. Introduce new technology. Introduce new technology when there is a need. Anticipate this need and satisfy it. This might include a new process or information about the topic itself.

t. Seek clarity. Seek clarity on behalf of group members. Group work provides ample opportunity for confusion. Pay attention to body language and comments that indicate that clarification is needed.

u. Resolve conflict. A good facilitator knows potential conflict possibilities and assures that needed disagreements are surfaced productively and dealt with effectively. In conflict situations, quickly maneuver the focus of attention away from the people and on to the idea, concept, or situation.

v. Remain flexible. Have a process track for the group to use as it progresses toward the objective. You must be sure there is a process track, and you must be sure to provide ample opportunity for productive departure from this track, when appropriate.

w. Generate enthusiasm. Build enthusiasm in the group. You may design assignments for individuals, groups of two, or small breakout groups to accomplish this. Whole group effort is built on these fundamental building blocks.

x. Modeling. When appropriate, model what is expected of others. An excellent opportunity for this behavior can be injected at the outset of any event by modeling the introductory exercise. For example, if participants are expected to introduce themselves by name and explain their expectations, then the facilitator should model by actually completing the exercise first.

y. Voting and sensing. Check the attitude of the group by calling for a vote or sensing of the group's opinion. This can be done directly by asking for a show of hands, or it can be done in less direct ways by using sampling techniques. Types of sensing range from holding up a number of fingers to coincide with agreement, to using a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" technique.

z. Tasking and directions. Be certain that directions are clear and that participants understand what is expected of them. By using modeling techniques (see above) and asking if they are clear the facilitator can eliminate confusion and add to credibility.

2. Facilitation Team Recorder. A group recorder produces a public record on chart paper. Graphic Facilitation enhances learning through a collective recording of event happenings. See Graphic Facilitation in Tab 5.

3. Facilitation Team Support. It is often difficult for the facilitator(s) to pay attention to all the support requirements of a group while in a learning mode. This third role of a facilitation team is especially important as the group size increases. In a smaller group participants may be able fulfill these requirements.

a. Time keeper. Ask the timekeeper to make sure you break and rejoin at the correct time and do not run the event over into the participants' free time at the end of the day.

b. Designated disagreeer. Someone should be responsible for surfacing participant disagreement. This will allow those who might be reluctant to discuss their concerns with the disagreeer during a break, and have that designated disagreeer be their spokesperson. 3x5 cards can also be used to present ideas when a participant does not want to discuss them in the open.

c. Paper hanger. If butcher paper is used extensively, it is a great help to the recorder to have a completed sheet hung for him/her. The charts should be posted and numbered in chronological order. This will aid in transcription later.

d. Exercise observer. Observation alerts the group to the fact that they are being noticed. Normally, like the Hawthorne effect, this alone will raise a group's level of alertness. In addition, much can be learned by watching a group exercise form the outside.

4. Panel discussion facilitator. A facilitator is often asked to assist by moderating a panel discussion. In this technique, it is essential that all panel members meet in advance to coordinate the ground rules for the panel, agree on a schedule and sequence of events, and establish roles and rules for the facilitator and panel members.

B. Facilitation Techniques

1. Basic Facilitation Techniques

- a. **Facilitate ice breakers.** Get a group involved and progressing on the task quickly.
- b. **Be a traffic cop.** Control the flow of information exchange. Be sure that everyone has a chance to interject and that the same people are not the only ones contributing.
- c. **Paraphrase.** Restate something being said to insure clarity.
- d. **Move energy.** Do the “facilitator’s dance” to move the focus of attention.
- e. **Boomerang.** Send statements or questions back to the originator or group.
- f. **Connect ideas.** Point out similar dialog.
- g. **Brainstorm.** Generate ideas by asking participants to voice thoughts to be recorded. Be active so that participants will feed off the ideas of each other.

2. Intermediate Facilitation Techniques.

- a. **Block.** Enter someone’s space to block the flow of counter-productive ideas or communications.
- b. **Prioritize.** Narrow the group’s attention to important items.
- c. **Chart implications.** Help determine what the implications of a course of action might be.
- d. **Summarize.** State the status of progress before continuing.

3. Advanced Level Techniques.

- a. **Be a Columbo.** Play dumb and let others help you understand what they may not understand. In so doing, they will learn.
- b. **Generate tension relievers.** Break an undesirable mental state and enable members to refocus attention productively.
- c. **Finalize decisions.** The best method for finalizing decisions, although the slowest, is a concordant method. See Process Facilitation in Tab 4 for more information of decisions.

C. Adversarial Conditions and Conflict

It is uncommon to have an event of any length where everyone is in accord and agreement on all points. Knowing how to deal effectively with discord in a learning group setting is an imperative.

- 1. Treat criticism as an opportunity.** Avoid the we/they attitude and focus attention on the situation. Legitimize differences in points of view. Building empathy through critical exploration is healthy. To avoid dealing with differences can be dangerous because the feelings go underground.
- 2. Your reaction is more important than your argument.** If confronted, respond appropriately. Your credibility will be spared if your reaction is appropriate and low key. Over-reaction from a facilitator is inappropriate by any yardstick.
- 3. Maintain your vocal norm.** When opinions flare, it is normal for voices to fluctuate, adding fuel to the fire. Maintain your normal volume, tempo, and pitch.
- 4. Listen attentively, ask clarifying questions.** Listen to what is being said and try to understand the differing points of view. Ask questions to be sure that you understand what is going on. Ask others for help to understand. Often, attackers will be self-neutralized when explaining what they really mean.
- 5. Acknowledge.** Acknowledge a confrontation, allow it to progress, then move the process forward. Ask, "Where do we go from here?" Someone else will know the answer. You, as the facilitator, do not have to have all the answers.
- 6. Use appropriate language.** Avoid inappropriate language at all costs. Do not meet inappropriate language in kind. If it surfaces, respond with acceptable vocabulary.
- 7. Look for areas of agreement.** See if there are areas where differing views can find common ground. Accentuate the areas of agreement.
- 8. Stick to facts.** Let opinions yield to facts. Get the facts straight, but acknowledge that the emotions in a situation are real too.
- 9. Don't argue with difficult people.** Difficult people love to argue and they are usually good at it. If you are not a difficult person you may be out of your class. Avoid on-line arguments with anyone you believe to be a difficult person. Let the group police anyone in this category.