

FACILITATION -
HOW TO GET PEOPLE TO TALK TO EACH
OTHER AND NOT PAST EACH OTHER

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NOT PAST EACH OTHER**

By Derrick F. Dufresne

I. OVERVIEW

Despite the advent and use of e-mail, phone and other devices, a great majority of people spends a good part of their day in meetings. Some meetings are scheduled; others occur spontaneously. Some are with co-workers, some with co-workers and supervisors, others amongst supervisors. Regardless of the type, length or nature of the meeting, there is usually someone who chairs or leads the meeting. Most of the time, the person leading the meeting is doing so because of his/her role within the organization – not because of any expertise or skill he/she has demonstrated in this regard.

Observation #1: Many people who lead meetings, shouldn't (or at least need some training).

In many cases, the person leading the meeting has an agenda of his/her own. This is not to say that is negative, it is simply a fact. Whether this meeting is of supervisors, clinicians or team members, the meeting is usually about something that the person leading the meeting has an opinion about.

It is this mixture of leading the meeting, having an opinion and expressing those opinions that often stifles discussion, does not involve all the participants, and, most importantly, does not provide inclusive feedback that leads to good decision-making.

The reason for these shortfalls are many, but first and foremost, is that the person leading the meeting often does not understand the difference between **group discussion** and **group facilitation**. Interestingly enough, Webster's New World Dictionary, defines "discuss" first as "to strike asunder, scatter, to shake or to beat (see squash), to disperse or dispel". "To talk or write about, to take up in conversation or in discourse or to consider and argue the pros and cons of" is the second definition.

Conversely, Webster defines "facilitate" as "to make easier the act of facilitation, increased ease of performance of any action resulting from the lessening of nerve resistance by continued successive application of a necessary stimulus".

While the last definition may seem far-fetched, the "increased ease of performance" may be described as increased discussion within a group and the "lessening of nerve resistance" may in actuality be overcoming the tendency of only a few people to talk within a group, lack of clarity of role and difficulty in achieving desired outcomes.

Most group leaders think their role is to lead the group in discussion. On the surface, this makes sense and appears to be a clear and desired outcome of the meeting.

Unfortunately, for reasons that will be discussed later in detail, group leaders often stifle the very discussion that they hope for. The major reason is that they do not understand the true difference between **leading a group discussion** and **facilitating a group discussion**.

Leading a group discussion often begins with the group leader defining an agenda topic that will be discussed by the group. Members may or may not have had advanced copies of an agenda or desired outcomes of the meeting. Regardless, in many cases, the group leader begins by giving his or her opinion about the agenda item. Thus, the group hears first not only the topic but also the opinion of the group leader about the topic.

Already, the discussion is tainted because, if this occurs, the group is already in a position of reacting to the group leader rather than giving their opinions free from any bias or steering that the group leader wittingly or unwittingly has foisted on the group.

Typically, after such opening comments, the group leader then will ask for opinions of the group members. Inevitably, there are members of the group that are more vocal than others. In most situations, the group leader acknowledges those that have either volunteered to speak on the topic or have injected themselves into the conversation while at the same time unwittingly ignoring those members of the group that are quiet or do not speak up in the general course in the discussion.

Observation #2: Group leaders need to clearly understand the difference between discussion and facilitation.

In order for many groups to succeed, group leaders will in many cases need to radically adjust their approach to group discussion. They will need to either recuse themselves from direct involvement in the discussion and facilitate that discussion or will need to appoint another member of the group as a facilitator or in certain circumstances have a facilitator outside the group assist with the group process.

Group discussion is just as Webster has told us. It is participants taking up conversation, arguing pros and cons, talking in a deliberate fashion.

Facilitation is to **make easier the process of discussion for all group members** encouraging discussion that invites and respects the opinions of everyone, whether a vocal or quiet member of the group. Facilitation is a skill, not an art. It can be learned by anyone as long as some simple but rather ironclad rules are followed.

Good facilitation involves all of the following:

1. The facilitator must be mainly concerned with process, not outcome
2. The facilitator cannot be an active member of the group.
3. The facilitator does not share his/her opinions about the topic during the group discussion.

4. The facilitator does not answer questions, the facilitator asks questions of the group that lead to outcomes defined, discussed and decided by the group.

Observation #3: Almost every group has both external and internal thinkers.

It is very easy to identify an external and an internal thinker within a group. External thinkers always have something to say (or they wish they did). External thinkers thrive on group discussion. Often whether invited or uninvited, they give their opinions on almost every topic and are actively involved in the discussion. They debate, discuss, argue, if need be, but at the very least, they are involved.

External thinkers thrive on group process. They listen to other's opinions, react, internalize information and then begin a cycle again of expression that is based on points that have come to light within the process.

Some external thinkers are already thinking of the next question when an answer or response is given by another group member. They are like a sieve that takes in all information and then filters out those parts that either agrees with their own philosophy, is of interest to them or, in some way, provides stimulus for further discussion.

Internal thinkers, on the other hand, do not often readily speak up in groups. They are reflective by nature, may or may not be shy, but, at the very least, so not feel the need to share every thought that comes to mind.

Internal thinkers do not utilize the group process to formulate their own opinions. They either listen to the opinions expressed and formulate them on their own or have come with a preconceived notion of what their opinion is and either agree or disagree with the discussion that is going on around them.

That is not to say that internal thinkers will not contribute voluntarily. On some occasions, if there is a position that is strongly held or if there is a break in the conversation, internal thinkers may contribute to the discussion.

Often group leaders do not recognize the two different types of group members that are spread out before them. In many cases, the group leader may be an external thinker themselves so they naturally gravitate to those who express their opinions.

Second, group leaders may mistakenly think that they have heard from everyone because they begin some sentences with, "Does anyone have any opinions on this?" or "I'd like to hear from everybody, if possible". Time after time what ends up happening is that the external thinkers chime in with their comments (possibly repeated ones) and the group leader mistakes continuing discussion from a few people as having heard from the group.

Internal thinkers hear the invitation of the group leader to participate, but for any number of reasons, often do not do so.

In dissecting the meeting afterwards, it is interesting to note the opinions of both external and internal thinkers. Often when asked how a meeting went, external thinkers will comment on the process as well as the outcome by saying, "That was a good discussion" or "Did you believe what _____ said?" They then may follow up by commenting on the specific decision that was made but often at least they will verify that their opinions were heard.

A far different opinion often is heard when discussing the meeting with internal thinkers. Especially, if a volatile or important topic is discussed and one asks an internal thinker what he or she thought, he or she may remark, "Nobody asked for my opinion" or "_____ says the same thing all the time".

External thinkers dominate discussions. They don't mean to nor do they see it as a control issue. It is just the way they are. External thinkers don't think much about internal thinkers during the discussion because they aren't participating. Because external thinkers thrive on the group process, they naturally focus on those that are involved in the process. Many external thinkers would be shocked to find out that the external thinkers dominated the group discussion and very little was heard from internal thinkers. When queried about this, it is not at all surprising to hear, "I didn't notice that" or "that never occurred to me".

It is not the responsibility of the external or the internal thinkers to solve this issue on their own. It is the responsibility of the group leader to include **all** members of the group in the discussion.

Make no mistake, this transformation will be difficult for all parties concerned. External thinkers who are used to dominating all group discussion will now be asked to wait their turn. Internal thinkers who are used to being ignored in many group discussions will be asked to participate. At times they may feel put on the spot or may not understand that they do not have to speak every time they are invited.

All of this involves learning the skills of facilitation so as to ensure that the group has the opportunity to define, discuss and decide outcomes that listen to the views of all of the members of the group and also make welcome views that focus on not eloquent or dominant but reward thoughtfulness and insightfulness.

The fact is that both external and internal thinkers are needed in groups. Both bring a different perspective and views that are important to be heard in the group. The difference is that the external thinker's views will always be heard. The internal thinker's views may not be heard unless they are invited and encouraged to participate.

The role of the group leader is critical in order to foster this process. If the group leader does not understand the process of facilitation, he or she will continue to make many of the aforementioned mistakes and, as a result, the group may reach a decision. However, it will not be based on true consensus or alignment but simply on the views of those with the loudest voices.

Observation #4: Facilitators cannot be part of the discussion.

In order to truly facilitate a meeting or discussion, whoever is facilitating the group cannot actively participate in the discussion. The facilitator focuses on the **process of the discussion**, not its content. The apparent conflict becomes readily apparent when the person leading the meeting is the person in charge or someone who has particularly passionate or strongly held views about the subject matter.

In order to solve this dilemma, one member of the group must either be designated as the facilitator of the discussion and, as a result, recuse him/herself from any discussion on the topic or an outside facilitator must be brought in to assist in the process. Either way, the facilitator's role makes him or her apart from rather than a part of the process. The techniques to be used by the facilitator will be discussed in greater detail later, however, it is the facilitator's role to ensure that all members of the group participate and to help the group define, discuss and then decided on the topic about which they have called the meeting.

II. WHAT IS FACILITATION AND WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR?

Facilitation, in a nutshell, is a process by which one person in a group assists the other group members in:

- **Defining the issue(s) to be discussed and the process by which this will occur**
- **Getting group members to discuss these issues in a manner that values all members of the group and does not only reward those who are most vocal (external thinkers)**
- **Encourages people who do not typically speak up in groups (internal thinkers) to participate while not putting anyone on the spot who chooses not to participate**
- **Assisting the group in deciding on an outcome that they desire at the beginning of the meeting and assisting the group at the end of the meeting in reviewing decisions that have been made and accountability for specific outcome/decisions.**

At the heart of facilitation is the ability to focus on process rather than outcome. The facilitator must be a good listener and be able to gain the trust of the group, and also be willing to ensure that the group follows the facilitation process.

Steps in the Facilitation Process

1. **Gathering** - At the beginning of the process, the most important role that the facilitator plays is to assist in setting the atmosphere for the upcoming discussion. This includes some specific logistics about facilitation that are critical.

First and foremost, people in the group **must be facing each other**. Arranging the chairs or tables classroom or theatre style with people lined up in rows does not foster good facilitated discussion. While it may seem very simple, be sure that tables are either arranged in a square or people are seated at round tables or chairs are arranged in a circle. It is important that the facilitator arrive early enough to the meeting to ensure that the room is conducive to the upcoming discussion.

Second, if group members do not already know each other, ensure that introductions are made. It is always a good idea to have individuals introduce themselves to the facilitator if they do not know each other. This will also assist the facilitator in determining people's roles and trying to see how they fit into a particular group. Once the logistics are taken care of and all members are seated comfortably, the next part of the process can begin.

2. **Define.** There are two parts to the defining process: (1) the role of the facilitator and (2) the topic to be discussed.

In the first, the facilitator should indicate that he or she will focus on the process of the discussion, not the outcome. If group members are unfamiliar with facilitation, the facilitator should make it clear that he or she will not be actively participating in the discussion, nor is it the facilitator's job to act as an expert or to provide technical assistance to the group. Rather, it is the role of the facilitator to make it easy for group members to discuss and to ensure that there is equal participation offered to all group members.

It is at this point that the facilitator should highlight the importance of **nominal group process**. Nominal group process is simply people taking their turns. The facilitator sets up a situation so that people are invited to speak rather than having a general discussion. This occurs in the following way:

- Start at a certain point within the group. Invite (hopefully by name) the first member to share their thoughts on a specific topic. If the person chooses not to speak at this point, he/she simply says, "Pass". When a person is either finished speaking or chooses to pass, the facilitator moves on to the next person.
- With each successive person in order, the facilitator invites that person to share a comment or thought. The process continues around the table until all of the participants have been invited to speak. Again, if a person chooses not to share thoughts at this point, there is no judgment or comment made. The person simply needs to say, "Pass".

It is very likely in groups where people are not used to facilitation that an external thinker, at some point in the process, may try to jump in with an additional comment, question or follow-up to what someone

else has said. It is critical that the facilitator does not allow this to happen. In a very gentle, but direct way, the facilitator must deal with this situation. If the person has already spoken and is attempting to speak again, the facilitator should gently remind the person that his/her thoughts have already been heard and that the facilitator will come back to him/her after inviting the entire group to speak.

If, on the other hand, a person who has not yet been invited to speak attempts to jump in, the facilitator should gently remind this person that the facilitator will get to him/her shortly and to please hold the thought.

This is one of the most critical parts of the facilitation process. The nominal group process essentially involves taking one's turn. External thinkers are not used to this and are used to jumping in and sharing thoughts whenever they come to mind. The facilitator must make certain that this part of the process is kept intact.

- After all group members have been invited to speak, the facilitator should then go back to anyone who has "passed" and invite any of those persons to now share a thought after initially passing. This process takes place before anyone who has previously spoken is given an additional chance to speak. In the same way as before, all individuals who "passed" should be asked if they now wish to share a thought. If they don't, they may simply pass a second time.

Once all group members have been invited to speak who passed, then the facilitator should first go back to anyone who had attempted to interrupt or who seemed to be anxious to share a thought. At this point, the facilitator must make a judgment as to whether or not to do a second go-round or to open up the meeting to general discussion. This is clearly a judgment call and there are no hard and fast rules.

The purpose of this process is to define how the process will work.

3. **Discuss.** After defining the facilitation process, the facilitator should then go on to clarify the issues that the group wishes to discuss. The facilitator can outline what he or she understands to be the issue to gain consensus of the group or the facilitator may ask a group member or members to define the issue and then to gain agreement of the group on the specific topic. Regardless of how the process goes, it is critical that the group reach consensus on what is the specific topic or topics that are to be discussed. This is key because the facilitator will then ensure that only these topics are discussed during the meeting unless the group decides later to expand the list of topics. This helps keep the meeting focused and productive.

After the discussion has run its course using the nominal group process and general discussion, it is time to **decide**. It is at this point that the facilitator needs to bring the group to consensus on what it is they wish to have as action items or decisions with which they will leave the meeting.

Key at this point of the meeting is for the facilitator to ensure that group members understand the **difference between agreement and alignment**. Too often a group leader will make a comment such as, "I'm sure we all agree," or "Do we have agreement on this?" Group members are often surprised to find out that even when some group members are nodding their heads affirmatively that, in their hearts, they may be saying, "I don't agree, but they've already decided anyway."

The fact of the matter is that it is very difficult to reach agreement in groups. Agreement makes the assumption that at least a majority of the group members are in favor. Sometimes this is done through a formal vote or the group leader is trying to read the group and see whether there is agreement. For the aforementioned reasons, this is both unwittingly dangerous and short-sighted on the part of the group leader.

A far more productive approach to this is to ask the group whether they can align themselves behind the decision. Alignment means getting behind the decision. It does not presume agreement with all of the decisions made nor does it ask anyone in the group to sacrifice their personal values by having to say they agree.

Alignment does mean that at this point my voice has been heard and I understand that a decision needs to be made. For the good of the group and looking beyond my own self-interested, I am willing to align myself with the decision. This means that within the group in future discussions, I may continue to disagree with the decision that has been made, but publicly outside the group, I will do nothing to undermine the decision nor will I indicate my disagreement that may be misconstrued by others.

This difference often frees group members from feeling like they are railroaded or that they are pressured into making a decision. At the same time, it makes it clear that group members have a responsibility outside of the group meeting to ensure that they both do nothing to undermine the decision, as well as to support decisions publicly. This goes a long way to implementing decisions and to sending a cohesive message to those not at the meeting that the group is speaking with one voice.