



Facilitation? Pffft! How Easy is That!

By Rhonda Sparks-Tranks

First published April 2013

Some time ago I was having coffee with someone who said “I don’t understand why you put so much attention on facilitation. What could be so hard in getting a bunch of people to sit around the table to talk”.

She then said: “Mind you most of the facilitated meetings where I work are useless; just people talking around in circles and nothing ever comes of it”. I could have choked on my coffee there and then. I’m pleased to add this person has never been involved in a meeting I’ve facilitated.



How many ineffective meetings have you been to? Why does the meeting so often go off the rails when people sit around a table and talk? Why do so many discussions go around in circles?

Anyone who has been at an effectively facilitated meeting at work knows there is much more involved than getting people to sit around and talk. Facilitation is purposeful; in fact the nature of the purpose is what distinguishes a facilitated group event from other types of group gatherings.

Although there are some crossovers, there are important differences between the role of a meeting chair, a moderator and a meeting facilitator, because their purpose is different. Even the ideal physical space is different. A boardroom is fine for a chaired meeting but problematic for a moderated discussion and counter-productive for a facilitated meeting.

People’s understanding of facilitation differs which causes confusion. I’ve sometimes been asked to facilitate a meeting when what the prospective client really wanted was someone to act as a moderator. My role would be to ask questions of a panel, field questions from the floor and manage the discussion. I’m happy to undertake that role but asked my client to refer to me as a moderator not a facilitator.

During the course of a meeting a facilitator may move into a discussion moderator role when appropriate – but overall we’re there to do much more than lead a discussion. The groups I work with as a facilitator have been convened for a specific purpose. They have a task / outcome to achieve within a timeframe and they seek the support of a skilled “process guide” to do that. I’m called in to help groups:

- Better understand a complex issue when different people hold different parts of the puzzle or have different expertise
- Solve a problem where more than one perspective is needed
- Explore possibilities or options and make a decision
- Plan something together and commit to implement that plan
- Decide and agree a course of action

This may involve sitting in circles or small groups – but discussions are always very focused. The whole point is for people to work collaboratively, which requires a focus on both the task and the relationships of people in the room. You might need to clarify the former and develop the latter.



The higher the stakes for the people involved the trickier this becomes. The facilitator needs to be able to work within a specifically designed process yet know when and how to be flexible around that design. A process that works well for one context may be disastrous for another.

Most of my facilitation work is within organisational settings. Someone – usually a leader but not always – suggests an independent facilitator be contracted. They understand the value of having someone who is a specialist at meetings who can incorporate different methods at the right time to help the group achieve its task. They also appreciate having someone “substantively neutral” (Roger Schwarz, *The Skilled Facilitator*, Jossey-Bass 2002) who can manage the overt or covert relationship dynamics that can derail a meeting, particularly when the stakes are high.

Sandy Schuman ups the ante and refers to group facilitation as a **superlative task** (also - Sandor Schuman, *The IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation*, Jossey-Bass 2005).

Pffft! How easy could it be? Well perhaps a little trickier than my coffee friend thinks.

How much value could be added if you could break the meeting pattern of a one way flow of information or “people just talking around a table and nothing ever coming of it” and help the group achieve productive outcomes? As a facilitator I can add that value, particularly for complex and difficult meeting situations

I believe that all leaders, managers and subject matter experts need at least basic facilitation capabilities to support others as they collaborate to solve problems and make decisions. The need grows as organisations become more complex and specialised. It is a useful skill for just about anyone working in group settings that require collaboration to achieve a task. That's why my core facilitation training workshop is called *The Essential Facilitator*.

My contact details are below.

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Rhonda has decades of experience as a trainer, coach and facilitator working with major corporations and organisations around the world. Her facilitation focus is usually: navigating organisational change after restructures, strategic direction setting and planning, and team development - particularly when work relationships have become dysfunctional.



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