

The Skilled Facilitator Approach

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The Skilled Facilitator approach is a values-based, systemic approach to facilitation. It is designed to help groups increase the quality of decisions, increase commitment to decisions, reduce effective implementation time, improve working relationships, improve personal satisfaction in groups, and increase organizational learning. It accomplishes this in a way that creates collaborative relationships between the facilitator and the group and within the group itself. In this chapter, I identify the key elements of the approach and explain how they fit together.

WHAT IS GROUP FACILITATION?

Group facilitation is a process in which a person whose selection is acceptable to all members of the group, is substantively neutral, and has no substantive decision-making authority diagnoses and intervenes to help a group improve how it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions, to increase the group's effectiveness.

Note: This chapter is adapted from *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches, New and Revised Edition* by Roger Schwarz, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2002.

The facilitator's main task is to help the group increase its effectiveness by improving its process and structure. *Process* refers to how a group works together. It includes how members talk to each other, how they identify and solve problems, how they make decisions, and how they handle conflict. *Structure* refers to stable and recurring group processes, such as group membership or group roles. In contrast, *content* refers to what a group is working on. For example, the content of a group discussion may be whether to enter a new market, how to provide high-quality service to customers, or what each group member's responsibilities should be. Whenever a group meets, it is possible to observe both its content and process. For example, in a discussion about how to provide high-quality service, suggestions about installing a customer hot line or giving more authority to those with customer contact reflect content. However, members responding to only certain members' ideas or failing to identify their assumptions are facets of the group's process.

Underlying the facilitator's main task is the fundamental assumption that ineffective group process and structure reduces a group's ability to solve problems and make decisions. While research findings on the relationship between process and group effectiveness are mixed (Kaplan, 1979), the premise of facilitation is that by increasing the effectiveness of the group's process and structure, the facilitator helps the group improve its performance and overall effectiveness. The facilitator does not intervene directly in the content of the group's discussions; to do so would require the facilitator to abandon substantive neutrality and would reduce the group's responsibility for solving its problems.

To create the collaborative relationship between the facilitator and group, ensure that the facilitator is trusted by all group members, and see to it that the group's autonomy is maintained, the facilitator needs to be acceptable to all members of the group (and seen as impartial toward individual members or parties), be substantively neutral—that is, display no preference for any of the solutions the group considers—and not have substantive decision-making authority. In practice, the facilitator can meet these three criteria only if he or she is not a group member. While a group member may be acceptable to other members and may not have substantive decision-making authority, the group member has a substantive interest in the group's issues. By definition, a group member cannot formally fill the role of facilitator. Still, a group leader or member can use the Skilled Facilitator principles and techniques to help a group. Effective leaders regularly use facilitation skills as part of their leadership role.

To *intervene* means “to enter into an ongoing system” for the purpose of helping those in the system (Argyris, 1970, p. 15). The definition implies that the system—or group—functions autonomously—that is, the group is complete without a facilitator. Yet the group depends on a facilitator for help. Consequently, to maintain the group’s autonomy and develop its long-term effectiveness, the facilitator’s interventions ideally should decrease the group’s dependence on the facilitator. The facilitator accomplishes this, when appropriate, by intervening in a way that teaches group members the skills of facilitation.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE SKILLED FACILITATOR APPROACH

The Skilled Facilitator approach is an approach to facilitation that I have been developing since 1980 when I began teaching facilitation skills. Often facilitation approaches represent a compilation of techniques and methods without an underlying theoretical framework. The Skilled Facilitator approach is based on a theory of group facilitation that contains a set of core values and principles and a number of techniques and methods derived from the core values and principles. It integrates the theory into practice to create a values-based, systemic approach to group facilitation. Exhibit 2.1 identifies the key elements of the Skilled Facilitator approach.

Exhibit 2.1
Key Elements of the Skilled Facilitator Approach

The Group Effectiveness Model
A Clearly Defined Facilitator Role
Useful in a Wide Range of Roles
Explicit Core Values
Ground Rules for Effective Groups
The Diagnosis-Intervention Cycle
Low-Level Inferences
Exploring and Changing How We Think
A Process for Agreeing on How to Work Together
A Systems Approach

The Group Effectiveness Model

To help groups become more effective, you need a model of group effectiveness as part of your approach. To be useful, the model needs to be more than descriptive—that is, it needs to do more than explain how groups typically function or develop because many groups develop in a way that is dysfunctional. To be useful, the model needs to be normative—that is, it should tell you what an effective group looks like. The group effectiveness model identifies the criteria for effective groups, identifies the elements that contribute to effectiveness and the relationships among them, and describes what these elements look like in practice. The model enables you and the group to work together to jointly identify when the group is having problems, identify the causes that generate the problems, and begin to identify where to intervene to address the problems. When you are helping to create new groups, the model helps you and the group jointly identify the elements and relationships among the elements that need to be in place to ensure an effective group.

A Clearly Defined Facilitator Role

To help groups, you need a clear definition of your role as facilitator so that you and the groups you are helping have a common understanding about and agree on the kinds of behaviors that are consistent and inconsistent with your facilitator role. This has become more difficult in recent years as organizations have used the word *facilitator* to define many different roles. Human resource experts, organization development consultants, trainers, coaches, and even managers have sometimes been referred to as “facilitators.” The Skilled Facilitator approach clearly defines the facilitator role as a substantively neutral person who is not a group member and works for the entire group.

The Skilled Facilitator approach distinguishes between two types of facilitation: basic and developmental. In basic facilitation, the facilitator helps a group solve a substantive problem by essentially lending the group his or her process skills. When the facilitation is complete, the group has solved its substantive problem but, by design, it has not explicitly learned how it improves its process. In developmental facilitation, the facilitator explicitly helps a group solve a substantive problem and learn to improve its process at the same time. Here the facilitator also serves as teacher, so the group can eventually become self-facilitating. Developmental facilitation requires significantly more time and facilitator skill, and it is more likely to create fundamental change.

Useful in a Wide Range of Roles

Although I described the Skilled Facilitator approach as having a substantively neutral third-party facilitator, the approach also recognizes that everyone needs to use facilitative skills even if they are not neutral third parties or not working in groups or teams. The Skilled Facilitator approach introduces roles in addition to facilitator: facilitative consultant, facilitative coach, facilitative trainer, and facilitative leader. All of these roles are based on the same underlying core values and principles as the role of facilitator. In addition, many of my clients have told me that they have used the core values and principles outside the workplace, including with their families and friends, and with positive results. The approach is broadly applicable because it is based on principles of effective human interaction. Consequently, if you use this approach across your roles, you are likely to be viewed by others as acting consistently and with integrity across situations.

Explicit Core Values

All approaches to facilitation are based on some core values. Core values provide the foundation for an approach and serve as a guide. They enable you to craft new methods and techniques consistent with the core values and to continually reflect on how well you do in acting congruently with the values. If you are to benefit most from the core values, they need to be explicit. The Skilled Facilitator approach is based on an explicit set of four core values—valid information, free and informed choice, internal commitment, and compassion—and principles that follow from them. (The first three core values come from Argyris and Schön, 1974.)

Valid information means that you share all the relevant information that you have about an issue in a way that others can understand it, as well as the reasoning by which that information is integrated. Ideally, valid information is specific enough so that others can confirm for themselves whether the information is valid. With free and informed choice, members make decisions based on valid information, not on pressure from inside or outside the group. With internal commitment, each member feels personally responsible for the decision and is willing to support the decision, given his or her role. With compassion, you temporarily suspend judgment to understand others who have differing views. When you act with compassion, you infuse the other core values with your intent to understand, empathize with, and help others in a way that still ensures that each person is accountable for his or her behavior. Together, the core values provide the foundation for the group

to collaboratively develop a common understanding of a situation and to make decisions and take actions to which it is fully committed.

As a facilitator, you need not only a set of methods and techniques but also an understanding of how and why they work. By using an explicit set of core values and the principles that follow from them, you can improvise and design new methods and techniques consistent with the core values. Without this understanding, you are like a novice baker who must either follow the recipe as given or make changes without knowing what will happen.

Making the core values explicit also helps you work with groups. You can discuss your approach with potential clients, so that they can make more informed choices about whether they want to use you as their facilitator. When clients know the core values underlying your approach, they can help you improve your practice, identifying when they believe you are acting inconsistently with the values you espoused. In this way, the core values provide a basis for a collaborative relationship in which facilitators learn with clients rather than the client's simply learning from the facilitator. Because the core values for facilitation are also the core values for effective group behavior, when you act consistently with the core values, not only do you act effectively as a facilitator, but you also model effective behavior for the group you are working with.

Ground Rules for Effective Groups

As you watch a group in action, you may intuitively know whether the members' conversation is productive even if you cannot identify exactly how they either contribute to or hinder the group's process. Yet a facilitator needs to understand the specific kinds of behaviors that improve a group's process. The Skilled Facilitator approach describes these behaviors in a set of ground rules for effective groups. The ground rules (see Exhibit 2.2) make specific the abstract core values of facilitation and group effectiveness.

The ground rules serve several functions. First, they serve as a diagnostic tool. By understanding the ground rules, you can quickly identify dysfunctional group behavior—which is inconsistent with the ground rules—so that you can intervene on it. Second, the ground rules are a teaching tool for developing effective group norms. When groups understand the ground rules and commit to using them, the members set new expectations for how to interact with each other. This enables the group to share responsibility for improving its process, often a goal of facilitation. Finally, the ground rules guide your behavior as facilitator.

Exhibit 2.2

Ground Rules for Effective Groups

1. **Test assumptions and inferences.**
2. **Share all relevant information.**
3. **Use specific examples, and agree on what important words mean.**
4. **Explain your reasoning and intent.**
5. **Focus on interests, not positions.**
6. **Combine advocacy and inquiry.**
7. **Jointly design steps and ways to test disagreements.**
8. **Discuss undiscussable issues.**
9. **Use a decision-making rule that generates the level of commitment needs.**

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Together, the ground rules enable group members to collaborate productively, exploring their different points of view, and develop a common course of action. For example, testing assumptions and inferences enables members to make sure that they are working together based on valid information about each other and the situation. Share relevant information, explain your reasoning and intent, focus on interests rather than positions, and ensure that members have a common base of information. By combining advocacy and inquiry, group members both share their views and encourage others to share different views and identify gaps in members' thinking. Jointly designing next steps and ways to test disagreements enables group members to collaborate on testing out their differing points of view rather than each member's gathering information to prove the other is wrong. Discussing undiscussable issues enables group members to address underlying issues that hinder group members from working together effectively.

The behavioral ground rules in the Skilled Facilitator approach differ from the more procedural ground rules (“start on time, end on time”; “turn off your beepers and cell phones”) that many groups and facilitators use. Procedural ground rules can be helpful, but they do not describe the specific behaviors that lead to effective group process.

The Diagnosis-Intervention Cycle

The group effectiveness model, the core values, and the ground rules for effective groups are all tools for diagnosing behavior in groups. But you still need a way to implement these tools. Specifically, you need to know when to intervene, what kind of intervention to make, how to say it, when to say it, and to whom. To help put these tools into practice, the Skilled Facilitator approach uses the diagnosis–intervention cycle, a six-step process:

1. Observe behavior.
2. Infer meaning.
3. Decide whether, how, and why to intervene.
4. Describe behavior, and test for different views.
5. Share your inference, and test for different views.
6. Help the group decide whether to change its behavior, and test for different views.

The cycle is a structured and simple way to think about what is happening in the group and then to intervene consistent with the core values. It serves to guide the facilitator (and group members) into effective action.

Low-Level Inferences

As a facilitator, you are constantly trying to make sense of what is happening in a group. You watch members say and do things and then make inferences about what their behavior means and how it is either helping or hindering the group’s process. An inference is a conclusion you reach about something that is unknown to you based on what you do know. For example, if you see someone silently folding his arms across his chest in a meeting, you may infer that he disagrees with what has been said but is not saying so.

The kinds of inferences you make are critical because they guide what you will say when you intervene, and they affect how group members will react to you. To be effective, you need to make these inferences in a way that increases the chance that you will be accurate, enables you to share your inferences with the group to see if they disagree, and does not create defensive reactions in group members when you share your inferences.

The Skilled Facilitator approach accomplishes this by focusing on what I refer to as low-level inferences. Essentially, this means that facilitators diagnose and intervene in groups by making the fewest and the smallest inferential leaps necessary. Consider two facilitators with different approaches, working with the same group simultaneously and hearing this conversation:

Tom: I want to discuss the start time for the new project. Next week is too soon. We need to wait another month.

Sue: That's not going to work. We need to do it right away. We can't wait.

Don: I think you're both unrealistic. We will be lucky if we can start it in ninety days. I think we should wait until the next quarter.

A facilitator making a low-level inference might privately conclude, and then publicly point out, that members have stated their opinions but have not explained the reasons for their opinions or asked other members what leads them to see the situation differently. Observing the same behavior, a facilitator making a high-level inference might privately conclude that the members do not care about others' opinions or are trying to hide something. Making high-level inferences such as this creates a problem when you try to say what you privately think. Higher-level inferences are further removed from the data that you used to generate them and so may be less accurate. If the inference also contains negative evaluations about others' motives, sharing the inference can contribute to the group members' responding defensively. By learning to think and intervene using low-level inferences, you can increase the accuracy of your diagnosis and your ability to share your thinking with others, and reduce the chance that you will create defensive reactions when you do so. This ensures that your actions increase rather than decrease the group's effectiveness.

Exploring and Changing How We Think

Facilitation is difficult work because it is mentally demanding—cognitively and emotionally. It is especially difficult when you find yourself in situations you consider potentially embarrassing or psychologically threatening. The research shows that if you are like almost everyone else, in these situations, you use a set of core values and think in a way that seeks to unilaterally control the conversation, win the discussion, and minimize the expression of negative feelings (Argyris and

Schön, 1974). This is called the unilateral control model. (I have adapted the unilateral control model from the work of Argyris and Schön, 1974, who developed the model and called it Model I, and from Robert Putnam, Diana McLain Smith, and Phil McArthur at Action Design who adapted Model I and refer to this as the unilateral control model.) You think of yourself as knowing all we need to know about the situation while thinking others who disagree are uninformed, you think of yourself as being right and others as being wrong, and you think of yourself as having pure motives while others' motives are questionable.

It is not possible to create collaborative relationships if you are thinking this way. Consequently, this thinking leads you to act in ways that create the very results you are trying hard to avoid: misunderstanding, increasing conflict, defensive reactions, and the strained relationships and lack of learning that accompany the results. To make matters worse, you are usually unaware of how your thinking leads you to act ineffectively. Rather, if you are like most other people, you typically attribute the cause of these difficult conversations to how others are thinking and acting.

The same problem that reduces your effectiveness as a facilitator reduces the effectiveness of the groups you are seeking to help. Like the facilitator, the group members are also unaware of how they create these problems for themselves.

The Skilled Facilitator approach helps you understand the conditions under which you act ineffectively and understand how your own thinking leads you to act ineffectively in ways that you are normally unaware of. It provides tools for increasing your effectiveness, particularly in situations you find emotionally difficult. This involves changing not only your techniques, but also how you think about or frame situations and the core values that underlie your approach. This shift to the mutual learning model means thinking that you have some information and others have other information, that others may see things you miss and vice versa, that differences are opportunities for learning rather than for proving others wrong, and that people are trying to act with integrity given their situation. (I have adapted the mutual learning model from the work of Argyris and Schön, 1974, who developed the model and called it Model II, and from Robert Putnam, Diana McLain Smith, and Phil McArthur at Action Design who adapted Model II and refer to this as the mutual learning model.) This shift in thinking makes it possible to use the ground rules appropriately for effective groups and reduce the unintended consequences that stem from the unilateral control model. Making this shift is difficult but rewarding work, and it is essential for creating authentic

collaborative relationships. By doing this work for yourself, you increase your effectiveness. Then you can help groups learn to reflect on and change the ways they think in difficult situations so that they can work more effectively together.

A Process for Agreeing on How to Work Together

Facilitation involves developing a relationship with a group—a social-psychological contract in which the group gives you permission to help them because they consider you an expert and trustworthy facilitator. Building this relationship is critical because it is the foundation on which you use your facilitator knowledge and skills; without the foundation, you lose the essential connection with the group that makes your facilitation possible and powerful. To build this relationship, you need a clear understanding and agreement with the group about your role as facilitator and how you will work with the group to help it accomplish its objectives. I have found that many of the facilitation problems my colleagues and I have faced stemmed from a lack of agreement with the group about how to work together.

The Skilled Facilitator approach describes a process for developing this agreement that enables the facilitator and the group to make an informed free choice about working together. The process begins when someone first contacts the facilitator about working with the group and involves a discussion with group members. It identifies who should be involved at each stage of the process, the specific questions to ask, and the type of information to share about your approach to facilitation. The process also describes the issues on which you and the group need to decide to develop an effective working agreement. The issues include the facilitated meeting objectives, the facilitator's role, and the ground rules that will be used. By using this process, you act consistently with your facilitator role and increase the likelihood that you will help the group achieve its goals.

A Systems Approach

Facilitators often tell me stories of how, despite their best efforts to help a group in a difficult situation, the situation gets worse. Each time the facilitator does something to improve things, the situation either deteriorates immediately or temporarily improves before getting even worse. One reason this occurs is that the facilitator is not thinking and acting systemically.

In recent years, the field of systems thinking has become popular in part through the work of Peter Senge (1990) and his colleagues. The Skilled Facilitator approach uses a systems approach to facilitation. It recognizes that a group is a social

system—a collection of parts that interact with each other to function as a whole—and that groups generate their own system dynamics, such as deteriorating trust or continued dependence on the leader. As a facilitator, you enter into this system when you help a group. The challenge is to enter the system, complete with its functional and dysfunctional dynamics, and help the group become more effective without becoming influenced by the system to act ineffectively yourself. The Skilled Facilitator approach recognizes that any action you take affects the group in multiple ways and has short-term and long-term consequences, some of which may not be obvious. The approach helps you understand how your behavior as a facilitator interacts with the group's dynamics to increase or decrease the group's effectiveness.

For example, a facilitator who privately pulls a team member aside who, she believes, is dominating the group may seem to improve the team's discussion in the short run. But this action may also have several unintended negative consequences. The pulled-aside member may feel that the facilitator is not representing the team's opinion and may see the facilitator as biased against him, thereby reducing the facilitator's credibility with that member. Even if the facilitator is reflecting the other team members' opinions, the team may come increasingly to depend on her to deal with its internal process issues, thereby reducing rather than increasing the team's ability to function independently.

Using a systems approach to facilitation has many implications, a number of which are central to understanding the Skilled Facilitator approach. One key implication is treating the entire group as the client rather than only the formal group leader or the member who contacted you. This increases the chance of having the trust and credibility of the entire group, which is essential in serving as an effective facilitator.

A second implication is that effective facilitator behavior and effective group member behavior are the same thing. Excepting that the facilitator is substantively neutral and not a group member, the Skilled Facilitator approach does not have different sets of rules for the facilitator and group members. Just as you use the core values and ground rules to guide your own behavior, you use them to teach group members how they can act more effectively. Consequently, when you act consistently with the core values and ground rules, you serve as a model for the group. The more that group members learn about how you work, the better they understand how to create effective group process. Ultimately, as group members model effective facilitator behavior, they become self-facilitating.

A third key implication is that to be effective, your system of facilitation needs to be internally consistent. This means that the way you diagnose and intervene in a group and the way you develop agreements with the group all need to be based on a congruent set of principles. Many facilitators develop their approach by borrowing methods and techniques from a variety of other approaches. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but if the methods and techniques are based on conflicting values or principles, they can undermine the facilitator's effectiveness as well as that of the groups they work with. For example, a facilitator who states that his client is the entire group and yet automatically agrees to individual requests by the group's leader may soon find himself in the middle of a conflict between the group and its leader rather than helping to facilitate the entire group. By thinking and acting systemically, you increase your long-term ability to help groups.

THE EXPERIENCE OF FACILITATION

Facilitation is challenging work that calls forth a wide range of emotions. Part of this work involves helping group members deal productively with their emotions while they are addressing difficult issues. It is equally important to deal with your own emotions as facilitator. Because your emotions and how you deal with them profoundly determine your effectiveness, the Skilled Facilitator approach involves understanding how you as a facilitator feel during facilitation and using these feelings productively.

These feelings are about yourself and the group you are working with. Throughout the facilitation, various events trigger your own reactions. You may feel satisfied having helped a group work through a particularly difficult problem or proud to see the group using some of the skills they have learned from you. Yet when your work goes so smoothly that the group does not recognize your contribution, you may feel unappreciated. When the group is feeling confused and uncertain about how to proceed in their task, you may be feeling the same way about the facilitation. If your actions do not help the group as well as you would like, you may feel ashamed because your work does not meet your own standards. You may be frustrated by a group's inability to manage conflict even if you have been asked to help the group because they are having problems managing conflict. You may feel sad watching a group act in ways that create the very consequences they are trying to avoid, feel happy that you can identify this dynamic in the group, and feel hopeful seeing that the group's pain is creating motivation for change.

At one time or another, I have experienced each of these feelings as a facilitator; they are part of the internal work of facilitation. The Skilled Facilitator approach enables you to become more aware of these feelings and increases your ability to manage them productively—what some refer to as emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). I have found that my ability to develop these emotional skills is both distinct from and related to my larger set of knowledge, skills, and experience as a facilitator. Although there are many ways to improve my facilitation skills that do not focus on dealing with my emotions, my use of any of these skills becomes more powerful if I am attuned to my feelings and to others' feelings and deal with them productively.

Through facilitating groups, you also come to know yourself by reflecting on how you react to certain situations, understanding the sources of your feelings, and learning how to work with your feelings productively. In doing so, you not only help yourself but increase your ability to help the groups with which you work.

CONCLUSION

The Skilled Facilitator approach is based on a set of core values. Using a systems thinking approach, it enables you to clearly define your facilitator role and develop explicit agreement with a group about how you will work together. Together, the core values, the group effectiveness model, the ground rules, and the diagnosis-intervention cycle help you identify functional and dysfunctional aspects of the group and intervene to help the group increase its effectiveness. The approach enables you to explore and change how you think and improve your ability to facilitate difficult situations. It also helps groups explore and change their thinking to help them create fundamental change. All of the elements in the Skilled Facilitator approach are integrated to enable both group members and the facilitator to create collaborative relationships in which they can learn with and from each other. The core values, principles, and methods of the Skilled Facilitator approach are equally applicable to facilitative leaders, consultants, coaches, and trainers.