

# Mastering the ART of Facilitation

By Julie Ruben Rodney



Do you dread facilitating meetings or education sessions for fear the participants will complain that they are a boring waste of time? If you learn how to facilitate properly, your audience will not feel this way. An effective facilitation should be engaging, productive and deliver successful outcomes. While it is not the easiest job and takes organized planning and preparation, if done well, it can be a very rewarding experience for both the facilitator and attendees. These four steps to effective facilitation are the key to ensuring your next meeting is a success.

## 1 Set Expectations for the Session

The Learning Objectives and/or the Meeting Agenda should be introduced at the very beginning to provide participants with a clear understanding of the expected outcomes of the meeting. The most effective way to encourage the group to support these objectives is to help establish a consensus at the outset, and follow up frequently along the way to ensure everyone is still on track and satisfied with the progress.

Ground rules should also be reviewed early on to set behaviour norms for the session. This can be followed by icebreakers, which are short, effective exercises that are fun but not frivolous. These activities help engage the group, foster a relaxing environment and allow the participants to become comfortable with each other.

As the facilitator, it is your job to keep the session moving and on schedule. This can be a difficult task when participants bring up issues and questions that take the discussion off topic. To avoid disruptions, create a list on a flipchart of items to be "parked," which you can revisit at the end of the session as time permits.

## 2 Manage Personalities in the Classroom

It is not uncommon in group discussions for some participants to be active while others are quiet. Have you ever been blindsided by a participant who was disruptive or constantly off topic? It is essential that everyone in the group participate and contribute to the discussion equally, not just a select few.

To be an effective facilitator, it is crucial to have an understanding of the different personalities in your classroom, and be able to manage the different levels of engagement and behavioural styles. Groups with many different personality types can experience more conflict during discussions, whereas groups with more similar personality types have a better understanding of each other.

Your goal is to make sure the different personality types are able to listen and be open to each other's ideas. One way to get low-key participants more involved in the discussion is to have small group activities or ask these individuals "safe" questions. To help you identify the different personality types and how to work with them, use behavioural profile tools such as **Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®)**.

### 3 Create an Experiential Learning Environment

To keep participants interested and engaged, it is important to create an experiential learning environment for everyone.

**David Kolb's Learning Styles Model** is an effective tool you can use to help determine the types of activities to incorporate into your session that would best accommodate the different learning styles of the group.

- ▶ **Accommodators** learn through experience and like to "dive" right in and practice. For these people, you need to have a lively presentation and a variety of activities to keep them interested.
- ▶ **Divergers** are understanding, empathetic and people-oriented. They are influenced by what people think and say, and are sensitive to their values. These individuals enjoy working in groups, and learn by watching, experiencing and listening to others.
- ▶ **Convergers** are step-by-step problem solvers. They are good at decision making and goal setting. They work well (and independently) given clear instructions and good documentation.
- ▶ **Assimilators** enjoy learning abstract concepts and theories. They observe carefully before making a judgment, and are good at defining problems and organizing information. These learners like to receive material in writing and prefer a structured training environment.

Try to incorporate all these styles into your meeting design to ensure you meet the learning needs of all participants.

### 4 Ask and Encourage Questions

Another fundamental skill an effective facilitator must have is the ability to ask, field and respond to questions from participants to help guide the discussions in a meaningful and productive way. Asking questions is a valuable skill, which you can use to open group discussions, ensure the group understands your points and give a new perspective on discussion topics. When fielding questions, encourage discussion by sending the question back to the individual who asked it. Perhaps they have some thoughts on the answer. You can also relay the question out to the rest of the group to see if anyone has an answer. As the facilitator, you should respond to questions only if no one has the answer. Allowing participants to answer taps into the expertise in the room and engages those who are familiar with the topic.

Remember, it is your role to keep the discussion moving, therefore, if someone has an issue, let them know that they are heard, but that you have to move on and keep the discussion going.

Overall, facilitation is more intricate than just "presenting" or "running a meeting." To be an effective facilitator, you need to have careful observation and active listening skills, a good sense of timing, and an understanding of group dynamics. The art of facilitation may not be easy to master, but with proper planning and preparation, your meetings will become more engaging and successful. ■

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