

## 🕒 19 MIN READ

### **The Role of a Facilitator**

#### **Guiding an Event Through to a Successful Conclusion**

So you've been asked to facilitate a meeting. What does that mean exactly?

Do you just ensure that everyone's introduced, and maybe kick off with a quick ice breaker exercise? Is your main role simply to stand by the flip chart and note down all the ideas? What preparation do you need to do? How do you manage the event, and how exactly do you pull the whole thing together?

In many types of group situation, and particularly in complex discussions or those where people have different views and interests, good facilitation can make the difference between success and failure.

As a facilitator, you may need to call on a wide range of skills and tools, from problem solving and decision making, to team management and communications.

#### **What Is a Facilitator?**

The definition of facilitate is "to make easy" or "ease a process." What a facilitator does is plan, guide and manage a group event to ensure that the group's objectives are met effectively, with clear thinking, good participation and full buy-in from everyone who is involved.

To facilitate effectively, you must be objective. This doesn't mean you have to come from outside the organization or team, though. It simply means that, for the purposes of this group process, you will take a neutral stance. You step back from the detailed content and from your own personal views, and focus purely on the group process. (The "group process" is the approach used to manage discussions, get the best from all members, and bring the event through to a successful conclusion. How you design this depends on many factors, and we'll explore this in a little more detail later in the article. The secret of great facilitation is a group process that flows – and with it will flow the group's ideas, solutions, and decisions too.)

Your key responsibility as a facilitator is to create this group process and an environment in which it can flourish, and so help the group reach a successful decision, solution or conclusion.

#### **Tip:**

Facilitation can take a lot of mental effort, meaning that it can be difficult to think about and contribute content while facilitating. Neutrality is also important. So if you have an interest in the outcome, or have skills, experience, information or authority which is important for a successful outcome, then consider bringing in an external facilitator.

### What Does a Facilitator Do?

To facilitate an event well, you must first understand the group's desired outcome, and the background and context of the meeting or event. The bulk of your responsibility is then to:

- **Design and plan** the group process, and select the tools that best help the group progress towards that outcome.
- **Guide and control** the group process to ensure that:
  - There is effective participation.
  - Participants achieve a mutual understanding.
  - Their contributions are considered and included in the ideas, solutions or decisions that emerge.
  - Participants take shared responsibility for the outcome.
- Ensure that outcomes, actions and questions are properly **recorded and actioned**, and appropriately dealt with afterwards.

We look in more detail at most important of these areas below.

### Design and Plan

With the group's objective firmly in mind, preparation for the meeting or event is all-important. Your job is to choose and design the right group process(es), and develop an effective agenda for the occasion.

#### Tip 1:

Whether you're planning a straight-forward meeting, or a complex event over several sessions or days, it's important to always keep in mind the **outcome** – and how you are helping the group to reach it.

If the event spans multiple sessions and topics, make sure that you are clear about both the desired outcome and process for each one. And make sure that you know how the outcome of each session or topic contributes to the outcome of the event overall.

**Tip 2:**

If you've been asked to facilitate an event by someone else, make sure that you consult him or her carefully as to the final "shape" of the event. Even if he hasn't been explicit about what he wants, he will probably have an idea of what he wants, and will be unpleasantly surprised if this isn't delivered.

Two key aspects of the design and planning are choosing the right group process, and designing a realistic agenda.

**Choose and Design the Group Process**

There are as many ways to design a group process as there are events to facilitate: it's quite an art! Group process design is also a huge topic in its own right, and something that professional facilitators learn through experience and training.

Here we consider some of the basic options and principle. And there are many tools and techniques here at Mind Tools that will help you facilitate effectively (see the "Facilitators' Toolbox" below for more details). There are also many wonderful books and guides on the subject – we recommend that you consult some of these if you're new to facilitation, or if you're facing the challenge of facilitating a particularly difficult event.

Here are just some of the factors and options to consider:

- **Do you want an open discussion, or a structured process?**  
An open discussion, well facilitated, may be the simplest option for your group process. But ask yourself whether you will be able to achieve the participation you need, and manage the discussion with the number of participants involved with this format. Can you cover the variety of topics needed? Can you generate enough ideas and solutions? And can you involve everyone, and get their buy-in?
- **What structured process should you choose?**  
If you need to accommodate participation from a large group, consider smaller "break-out" groups. Are you concerned about getting enough participation? Then give people time in the agenda to think about and write down the things they want to contribute. If you want to get ideas flowing, then consider including a **brainstorming** session. More information about different structured processes can be found in the Facilitators' Toolbox below.
- **Other factors to consider**  
You won't be able to change some constraints. However, you may be able to change others to optimize your process and agenda. As part of this, consider:
  - The number of participants.
  - The nature of the topics under discussion.

- The type of involvement people need to have.
- The background and positions of the participants.
- How well they know the subject – and each other.
- The time you have available.

Remember, whatever group process you define, it's a question of keeping your focus on outcomes. Find the best way to achieve the objectives of the overall event.

### **Facilitators' Toolbox**

Here are just some of the tools and techniques at Mind Tools that can help make a great meeting or event:

- **Ice Breakers** – Easing group contribution.
- **Running Effective Meetings** – Setting an objective and sticking to it.
- **Modified Borda Count** – Prioritizing issues to achieve consensus.
- **MultiVoting** – Choosing fairly between many options.
- **Brainstorming** – Generating many radical ideas.
- **The Charette Procedure** – Brainstorming many ideas with many people.
- **The Delphi Technique** Achieving consensus among experts.
- **Concept Attainment** – Reaching a shared understanding of issues.
- **Role Playing** – Preparing for difficult situations.
- **Avoiding Groupthink** – Avoiding fatal flaws in group decision-making.

As well as these, several sections are packed with useful tools and techniques:

- **Strategy Tools** – Tools and techniques that help you understand your environment and think about the best way forward.
- **Creativity Tools** – Tools that help you develop creative solutions to problems.
- **Problem Solving Tools** – Which help you understand and solve complex problems.
- **Decision Making Techniques** – Giving you good formal tools for making difficult decisions.

## Designing a Realistic Agenda

Designing the agenda goes hand in hand with designing the group process. As you iterate between designing the process and designing the agenda, the event starts to take shape. Among the factors to consider when planning the agenda are:

- In what order should the topics be presented?
- How will participants get to know each other?
- How will they gain a common understanding of the objectives?
- If an event is to be broken into separate sessions, how much time should be allocated to each item?
- Will all participants be involved each session?
- Or will some be in smaller, break-out groups?
- How and when will break-out groups' feedback to the wider group?
- When will you recap and summarize?
- How will the outcomes of one session flow into the next?
- How will you achieve closure of the overall event?

By the end of the design and planning stage, you should have a solid agenda, which focuses on outcomes, and provides a good flow and structure for the event.

## Other Design and Planning Considerations

In addition to process and agenda, you should also consider the following:

- Information and materials – What do participants need to know before or at the event? How will this be provided and when?
- Room arrangements – What room set-up will best encourage participation? Are separate rooms needed for break out groups?
- Supplies – What supplies and props do you need? Pens, flip charts, post-it notes are just the starters – make sure that you have everything you need for the agenda and process you've planned. And make sure that you have backups for things like data projectors, just in case these fail.

## Guide and Control the Event

With the agenda and group process in place, it's time to think about how you'll guide and control the proceedings. There's still some preparation to do for this, and then there's the whole business of guiding and controlling the event itself.

The final stage of preparation is to think about how you'll guide and control the meeting. This is where you prepare the ground rules for the event, polish your facilitation skills, and also consider some what-if scenarios: what if there is major disagreement? What if a solution does not emerge? and so on.

At the meeting itself, as the facilitator, you'll set the scene and ensure that participants are clear about the desired outcome, the agenda, the ground rules and expectations for the event. By doing this, you help everyone focus on the task at hand. At the start of the meeting, and throughout, your role is to use to ensure the meeting keeps progressing towards a successful outcome.

To guide and control the meeting, you will need to:

- **Set the ground rules** – What rules should participants follow in the meeting? How will people interact? How will you ensure that people respect each others' ideas? How will questions be handled? You'll prepare some ground rules in advance, and propose and seek agreement to these at the start of the event.
- **Set the scene** – Here, you'll run through the objectives and agenda. Make sure that everyone understands their role, and what the group is seeking to achieve.
- **Get things flowing** – You'll need to make sure that everyone introduces themselves, or perhaps use appropriate **icebreakers** to get the meeting off to a positive start.
- **Keep up the momentum and energy** – You might need to intervene as the proceedings and energy levels proceed. Make sure that people remain focused and interested. (If energy levels are beginning to flag, perhaps it's time to take a break?)
- **Listen, engage and include** – Even though, as the facilitator, you're taking a neutral stance, you need to stay alert, listen actively, and remain interested and engaged. This sets a good example for other participants, and also means you are always ready to intervene in facilitative ways. Is everyone engaged? If not, how can you bring them in? How can you get better participation?
- **Monitor checkpoints, and summarize** – Keep in control of the agenda, tell people what they've achieved and what's next; summarize often.
- **Intervene only if absolutely required.**

**Tip:**

As a facilitator, there are many situations in which you may need to intervene. Rehearse when and how you'll do this. Keep the lightest of touch. And bear in mind the need to remain objective, keep the focus on the desired outcomes, and generally maintain a positive flow.

The most difficult types of intervention are those involving conflict, anger and disagreement. Remembering your role, it's important to focus on the needs of the group, whilst considering the feelings and position of both parties involved in any disagreement.

To keep the event flowing and positive:

- **Watch for and close any side conversations.** These limit the ability of others to focus, and often people are exchanging ideas that should be brought to the group.
- **Keep a close eye on the timing.** Be flexible, and balance the need for participation with the need to keep things running efficiently.
- **Learn what to do when a discussion isn't reaching a natural conclusion.** Is more information needed? When and how will the discussion proceed? Park topics that cannot be concluded, and ensure that action time is scheduled to address these issues.
- **Be on the lookout for people who aren't participating fully.** Are they experiencing discomfort? What is the source of the discomfort? What can you do to bring them into the conversation?
- **Pay attention to group behavior, both verbal and non-verbal.** Some of the most damaging behavior is silent, so know how to spot it and stop it effectively.
- **Step in and mediate immediately if there are obvious personal attacks.** Effective facilitators look for the least intrusive intervention first, so reminding everyone of the ground rules is often a good place to start. Whatever the issue, you can't allow bad behavior to continue so be prepared to take the steps necessary to stop attacks.

### **Record and Action**

Last but not least among the responsibilities of a facilitator is the recording of outputs, and of bringing these together, sharing them, and making sure they are actioned.

The key to successful recording of outputs from an event is to be clear about what will be recorded, how and by whom. Make sure that people's responsibilities are 100 percent clear, whether they are yours or others' involved.

**Tip:**

When we think of a facilitator, it's the recording function part of their role that most often comes to mind. We see a person standing in front of an easel that is packed with paper, with felt pen in hand, and ready to write furiously when the ideas start flowing.

While this is an important function, remember that, for the ideas to flow, the planning, and guiding and controlling functions must be attended to first. You can have all the paper in the world but if your meeting is not well planned, guided, and controlled, you could be facing an empty piece of paper at the end of the event.

When you are recording and actioning, here are some things to remember:

- You are responsible for making sure the participants hear, see, and understand the information that is presented and offered. Make sure that you keep an accurate record of what's going on. If in doubt, record now and summarize later.
- Try to use words that the group chooses, and when in doubt, ask them to provide the words for you to record.
- Ensure that all decisions and actions are recorded. You may want to use a scribe to do this, so that you can stay focused on the group and the process.
- As you record decisions and actions, check with the group that the information you're recording is a fair and accurate reflection of what's been discussed.
- Remind the group what has been discussed, and keep them focused and moving forward.
- If in doubt, ask for clarification before the discussion moves on.
- Make sure that responsibility for, and commitment to, action, is obtained and recorded when necessary.
- After the event, follow up to ensure that outstanding actions and issues are progressed, and that the proceedings are brought to a successful conclusion.

**Key Points**

To be an effective facilitator you must know when to take a leadership role, and when to be neutral and take a back seat. This is a difficult balance to maintain! The key to being proficient in the role is to plan and guide the proceedings effectively, and remain focused on the group process and outcomes, rather than specific content and opinions involved.

Facilitation is an interesting, rewarding and important role to take on. When facilitating, take time to think about the process and agenda, and learn the skills you need to take the



event through to a successful conclusion. Take pride in the role of facilitation, and enjoy watching the ideas, solutions and successful outcomes flow!

atings

Free login needed. [Login](#) / [Create Log i](#)

**LBrowne** 2021-03-24 17:40:08



**Non Member** 2020-10-22 03:36:31



An excellent read especially for someone who is new to facilitation.

**WillMac** 2020-10-08 12:56:18



Pretty well done but quite a few typos and other sentence errors.

**Non Member** 2020-09-22 10:57:43



**mindy326** 2020-07-05 16:55:49



Great content and informative. One recommendation, may we use he/she versus he only. Thank you for listening. Be well and be safe.

1 2 3 ... 21

From  emerald  
WORKS



**© Emerald Works Limited 2021. All rights reserved. "Mind Tools" is a registered trademark of Emerald Works Limited.**