

What is the Difference Between Facilitation and Mediation?

Written by [John Curtis](#) on July 22, 2013. Posted in [Mediation](#)

What's the difference between facilitation and mediation? They are both means to an end – but the journey to get there is different. While the terms are often used interchangeably, there are clear differences between these two alternative dispute resolution techniques and clear instances in which one or the other is better suited for the job. But because workplace conflict does not always follow straight lines, it can be helpful to create an approach that combines the best of both mediation and facilitation.

A facilitator's role is to help a group come to a joint decision. A mediator might well say this is part of her/his job as well, but typically, in cases where facilitation is used there is no hot burning conflict between members of the group. Of course, one might arise in the course of the discussion or decision-making process and the facilitator has to be ready to deal with that possibility. The conflict, if there is any, has not crystalized. It has not affected the group's ability to work with one another and reach a decision on the matter at hand, and it is less likely to boil over into the discussion. Facilitation is being used as a method for stimulating productive and collaborative discussion and problem solving.

Mediators, on the other hand, tend to start with hotter conflicts. There might be an entire group in conflict, or individual members in the group who are in conflict and others who feel forced to choose sides. In this case, the lines between facilitation and mediation blur. We might call it "multi-party mediation." Even if the entire group is not directly involved in the discord, it is affecting the work environment. Sometimes I call such multi-party mediations a "facilitation" simply because that sells better for the conflict deniers or those who don't feel they are part of it.

In many cases, there is a group dynamic that develops which allows the conflict to perpetuate. For instance, a conflict which starts between two members can spread or live a longer life than it would otherwise because of the dynamics of the group. People might choose sides; people might talk about one another behind their backs; people might manipulate and spread rumors. It is like a fire traveling underground by the roots in a forest. You can put it out in one place only to have it pop up in another, often unexpected, place.

Within these types of groups, there is a complex set of interconnections that are invisible. They have to be laid bare before you can work on the group dynamic and keep it from perpetuating conflict. This process is probably much closer to mediation than facilitation, according to convention definitions. Not each group member is part of the active problem, but they are involved in perpetuating it. Through group facilitation, they can also be involved in resolving it.

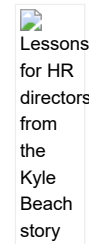
Facilitation is usually centered around discussing a strategic problem: we might have a facilitated session, for instance, around developing initiatives to achieve a specific objective. Mediation typically deals with parties in conflict with each other. Combining the goal oriented focus of facilitation and the relationship repairing of mediation can help groups that have become mired in a toxic work environment and need a way out.



John Curtis

John Curtis is a successful lawyer with over 15 years' experience in litigation focusing on Sport Law and Mediation Services. In addition, he is an expert in providing engaging, hands-on [Conflict Resolution Training](#) including [Mediation Training](#), [Negotiation Skills Training](#) and [Conflict Coach Training](#)

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