

10 Tips to Boost Your Facilitation Skills June 2009 By Lonnie Pacelli

Perhaps you've had some experiences with facilitation and know the do's and don'ts. Then again, maybe you're struggling with how to be a good facilitator. Give these ten tips a look and see where you can improve your facilitation skills and help your clients solve their own problems:

1. **Do your homework.** – Take the time to understand the problem to be solved, the key players involved in the meeting, and the "hot buttons" around the problem statement. Talk to the boss plus one or two of the key players who are on opposite sides of the problem statement. Resist the temptation of developing your own conclusions prior to the facilitation meeting, though. If you come across as jaded you'll lose the trust of the meeting attendees.
2. **Articulate the problem statement.** – Key to any facilitation meeting is a clear, crisp articulation of the problem statement and ensuring that all meeting attendees agree with the problem statement. Write down the problem statement on a whiteboard or easel in plain sight of the attendees so you can refer back to it throughout the meeting.
3. **Encourage inclusion of all attendees.** – Take particular note of those who aren't speaking up during the meeting. Look for opportune moments to ask them specific questions about what they think about a particular comment or issue being discussed. While encouraging inclusion is important, be cautious not to "pick on" any attendees and create an environment of discomfort.
4. **Keep things moving toward addressing the problem statement.** – Frequently as a facilitator you'll find that a discussion will drift off course and will not be contributing towards addressing the problem statement. Your job as facilitator is to keep the discussion moving forward while at the same time not being so rigid that you'll frustrate your meeting attendees. If the discussion has drifted to addressing a different problem statement or if the discussion has become destructive, bring it back on course.
5. **Establish a "parking lot".** – Many times a facilitated meeting will uncover other important issues which should be captured but are not germane to solving the stated problem statement. Capture those items in a "parking lot" to be addressed in future discussions. Ensure the parking lot is visible to all attendees and refer back to it as necessary to keep your discussion focused.
6. **Maintain a list of action items.** – Frequently during facilitated discussions specific actions relative to solving the problem statement will be revealed. Be diligent about capturing those action items and ensure they are clearly visible to all meeting attendees. Ensure that the action item addresses what needs to be done, who needs to do it, and when it needs to be done. Also take the time to summarize the action items at the end of the meeting to ensure everyone agrees as to the importance, assignment, and timing of the action items.
7. **Stay objective.** – As a facilitator it is super important that you are perceived as completely objective and are not viewed as being in anyone's "camp" during a discussion. Once a facilitator is viewed as biased then the trust of the meeting attendees (particularly those who are on the opposing side of the facilitator's bias) will quickly be lost. Once you've lost the trust it's difficult to regain, so stay objective and don't reveal your biases.

8. **Discover through questioning, not preaching.** – Facilitating doesn't mean you get on your soapbox and start espousing your vast wisdom on the topic at hand. Facilitation means you use your wisdom to help others get to a common, agreed-upon resolution to problems. The best facilitators do so by asking pointed, specific questions which are relevant to the problem statement and designed to bring new facts to light. Once the facilitator starts pontificating then the meeting becomes more about the facilitator and less about the attendees solving the problem.
9. **Keep the boss from hijacking the discussion.** – I've seen many, many facilitated discussions where the highest ranking person in the meeting expresses his or her opinion and subsequently sets the course of the meeting to his or her agenda. Once the boss states a perspective then those afraid to challenge him or her aren't going to speak up. Have a discussion with the boss up front to ensure that he or she doesn't jade the meeting.
10. **Be the one in control of the discussion.** – As the facilitator you need to keep the meeting moving forward and avoid being rat-holed on some off-the-beaten-path discussion. This may mean wrestling control of the discussion from an outspoken attendee or shifting the discussion topic back to the problem statement. It's isn't always pleasant and you're likely to tick someone off, but that's your job. Lose control of the discussion and you'll lose respect of the attendees.

Facilitation is one of the most important skills you as a consultant bring to the table in helping your client solve problems collaboratively. Keep these ten tips in mind when you are about to help your client solve its next tough problem.

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