

# Facilitation - Depend upon the Process

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## Abstract

This article provides 3 tips for anyone involved in facilitation, a useful reminder for those with experience, crucial advice for those new to the discipline. The message is to clearly define outcome, focus on process, moving away from any source of disturbance.

## Introduction

Like many management activities, facilitation is one of those things that people will undertake every now and again in an informal capacity, though they may not have received any prior practice or training. In most instances all will go well, people are generally well disposed and well behaved, and will contribute generously to the process. When this is not the case, things may come unravelled quickly and the inexperienced or unprepared facilitator may find themselves the centre of some unwelcome attention. Simple preparation and two fundamental tactics can keep things positive and moving forward and hopefully leave the facilitator un-scarred.

## 3 Tips for Effective Facilitation

### 1. Don't just stand at the front and assume it will all take care of itself

The first and fundamental pitfall of facilitation is that everyone assumes they know how it works – you stand at the front, ask questions and record what is said.

This approach will work perfectly well until . . .

- You don't have the confidence to stand
- You ask the wrong question
- You can't keep up with what's said . . . And so it goes on

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Before anyone facilitates anything, be clear and firm about what it is you want to achieve. Some vague notion or topic for discussion is an invitation for mono-thematic, showboating bores to take the floor. Have a credible introduction, an outcome and a time limit – open your discussion in this manner and people will know where they (and you) stand.

E.g. FACILITATOR: “Good morning everyone and thanks for coming, as Mr Hadrian’s newly appointed imperial integrity manager, I would like to spend the next two hours getting everyone’s thoughts on managing cross border relations between the yet to be created England and Scotland.”

## 2. Present a clear process and stick to it

As a facilitator you have no formal authority, meaning no big stick or carrot to dictate to people what to do or what to say. However, you do have the primary role of ensuring that the meeting progresses towards an end goal. Although the content of the discussions, and what the end result ‘looks like’ is up to the participants as a group and not you, you may need to subtly shape content by facilitating the questioning of assumptions, listening well, paraphrasing and supporting creative inputs.

In order to keep things on track and maintain presence and progress you need to clearly explain what you expect, and gain everyone’s acceptance.

E.g. FACILITATOR: “For the next ten minutes I would like to ask each of you for one issue you feel is crucial to the integrity of the yet to be established frontier. I’ll move around the room asking for one comment each. Just to confirm, this is to determine what the issues are. There will be an opportunity to discuss them later in the meeting. Are we agreed?”

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The benefit of this approach is that everyone knows what they are being asked to contribute – and more importantly you have a legitimate licence to rein people in if they don't stick to the process.

E.g. WOAD TRADER: “Well I'm glad you asked 'cause as it happens I represent the international woad traders and I'm not at all happy about any notion of border controls without our members being consulted and I would like to go on about the issue of woad for hours and hours.”

FACILITATOR: “A perfectly fair point sir, so may we take it that the issue that concerns you is the free and fair movement of woad? I'll make a note of that now and if you want to discuss it further, there'll be an opportunity after we have allowed everyone to raise any issues of concern to them. Now, may I move to the blue faced woman to your left – did you have an issue you wished to raise?”

Provided you have an outcome everyone is clear about (1 issue from everyone) and a process to which you are adhering (I will move around the room in order), it's very difficult for anyone to take over the discussion without flagrantly abusing the social contract you have established.

### 3. Move the focus away from the disturbance

Provided you have opened with a clear introduction and process, should any participant wish to take over the meeting, you have a clear and legitimate ability to resume control, even though you have no formal authority. Make your point of focus the innocent rather than the antagonist – if you address the antagonist you legitimise their intervention rather than your own position.

E.g. WOAD TRADER: “Oi! Never mind about her. What about the down trodden woad traders? Are you saying you don't care about them then?”

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Move your eyes across the rest of the participants, ignoring eye contact with the antagonist and returning attention to the blue faced woman and continue.

FACILITATOR: “I appreciate your concern, though as we agreed, I would like to gather one contribution from everyone before we discuss things further. So may I proceed to you, what was the issue you wished to raise?”

The intention here is to isolate a more difficult participant in favour of the majority who have already agreed to the process you have established whilst avoiding confrontation or defensive behaviour.

## Conclusion

In the majority of cases, facilitation will be a simple and beneficial activity though it may be difficult to predict which cases these are. This paper simple recommends that in every event the facilitator takes three simple steps.

## Author

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## About the Author

Lindsay works with organisations to support Change through facilitation and training. Clients include: Mercedes Benz, DHL Logistics, Local and Unitary Authorities, Department for Communities and Local Govt.

For more information on Lindsay, please click [here](#).

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