

Meeting Ease through Facilitation

PMM5 Postscript[™] Number 13

Background Information: In *Professional Meeting Management*[®], fifth edition, Chapter 8, Small Meetings Management by MaryAnne Bobrow, she addresses some of the challenges in conducting a small meeting. Bobrow discusses issues like:

- Opening the meeting
- Establishing ground rules for the meeting
- Time management
- Establishing the discussion management process

Later in the chapter, Bobrow introduces a short case study where an association employed a facilitator to lead a board retreat. Facilitators help people and organizations determine clear solutions to organizational issues (Bobrow, 2006, p. 113).

PMM5 Postscript[™] Use: There are many types of meetings that can benefit from a good facilitator including:

- Strategy setting sessions
- Management retreats
- Association meetings
- Industry roundtables
- Meetings focused on
 - Negotiations
 - Conflict resolution

This PMM5 Postscript[™] explores the topic of facilitation. Facilitators play a specific and often important role in meetings. The PMM5 Postscript[™] also includes additional group discussion or research projects to supplement the PMM5 chapter.

Learner Outcomes: At the completion of this reading, you should be able to:

- Describe the benefits of using a facilitator.
- Identify the skills in a facilitator.
- Describe the difference between leadership and facilitators.

Related PMM5 Chapter: Chapter 8, Small Meetings Management: Small Does Not Mean Uncomplicated
Author: MaryAnne Bobrow, CAE, CMP



Facilitation Defined

Professional facilitators engage diverse groups of people and move them toward results. A facilitator helps groups work together to make decisions, develop plans and then implement those plans. Facilitators excel in their ability to help groups solve problems before they become disastrous helping everyone to reach goals and realistic solutions.

Facilitators benefit organizations by:

- Saving time and money
- Introducing group problem solving processes
- Enabling more effective and efficient solutions
- Connecting people from diverse and/or cross-functional teams
- Improving communication
- Supporting a participative management style

The word "facilitate" is derived from the Latin word "facilitas" which means easiness. Facilitation is helping people successfully work together. The facilitator simply makes it easy for the group to carry out its mission.

Facilitation Does Not Equal Leadership

Despite a facilitator's presence, the group remains responsible for decision-making, planning and implementation. This is why during a meeting, facilitation is not the same thing as leadership (nor is the facilitator necessarily the same person as the leader).

Facilitation involves managing group processes and dynamics — influencing how members work together — and the nature of that responsibility calls for a high degree of neutrality about content issues and a focus on group needs.

Leadership requires quite the opposite: an active engagement in content issues — expressing opinions, presenting arguments and a focus on the matters of the moment.

An effective facilitator differentiates between content and process. Process is the way the group works together. Process is the *how*. Content is the actual ideas, suggestion and decisions that comes out of group discussion. Content is the *what*.

The Facilitator As The Traffic Cop

Organizations increasingly rely on teams to accomplish work. Implicit in the use of teams are the following realities:

- Participation is important
- Teams generally perform better than individuals
- Process (how something is done) affects outcome (what is accomplished)

Facilitators can help achieve participation while encouraging the strength of the team. An analogy for an effective facilitator is the traffic cop. The police officer in this position stands in the middle of the street telling cars when to go, stop or turn. The officer directs traffic just a facilitator directs the flow of discussion. The officer doesn't actually drive anyone's car. (However, importantly, while an officer can show his/her displeasure with a scowl or frown, a facilitator should remain neutral using words and body language.)

An effective facilitator will have the following capabilities and skills:

- **Keep the group aware** of desired outcome, topics of discussion, time constraints, group decisions, group accomplishments or progress, staying on track
- **Seek equal involvement** without putting anyone on the spot
- **Exhibit active listening** through nonverbal acknowledgment, rephrasing and empathetic response
- **Use questions effectively** by employing open-ended questions
- **Monitor group behavior** through ground rules and a guiding of the process
- **Build group consensus** in the form of 100% support, not necessarily 100% agreement
- **Be flexible** by making changes based upon the group's need or request
- **Be sensitive** by protecting the self esteem of individuals
- **Be tactful** by validating people's opinions and letting the group guide the content

When To Call In A Facilitator

A meeting manager might recommend a facilitator for a meeting when:

- No one in the group is objective
- The groups is facing a difficult issue
- The group is not moving
- A jump-start is required a series of meetings
- Conflict exists — either process conflict where the group can't decide how to go about it's meeting **or** content conflict where the group can't decide on the what **or** submerged conflict exists **or** communication style conflict exists
- New team is formed

Sample meetings where facilitators can assist include:

- Cross-functional teams
- Management retreats
- Negotiations
- Focus Groups

Summary

Facilitation is warranted for meetings where the meeting leader is too close to a situation, where conflict has occurred or, simply, where an objective outside opinion would be helpful. Facilitation offers organizations easy solutions to save time, money and effort.

The key is to select a facilitator who understands the issues, can work with the group dynamics to move the group to a close and can convey flexibility and process to the issue at hand.

Meeting managers would serve their organizations well to recognize situations where a facilitator could aid the meeting and its participants.

Group Discussion or Projects

1. How could a facilitator help in these situations. Please pick 1-2 scenarios and describe the potential role for a facilitator:
 - Brainstorming
 - Virtual meeting
 - Building trust among a cross-functional team
 - Mediation between two groups of employees
2. Communication occurs at a verbal and non-verbal level. Discuss how a facilitator can help read verbal and non-verbal communications.
3. The facilitator will maximize the meeting environment. What recommendations would you make as a meeting manager to create the optimal meeting environment for a facilitator?
4. Teams can be tension-filled often complicated by diversity of age, sex, culture, and interests, experiences and professional background. The teamwork that facilitators advocate and generate is not based on mutual affection so much as on mutual commitment to a common task. What meeting elements might contribute to creating an environment of mutual respect and commitment?

References

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