

# Innovation *insights*

OFFICE OF PLANNING AND  
Institutional Assessment

Innovation Insight Series Number 16  
<http://www.psu.edu/president/pia/innovation/>

## Facilitating Teams for Organizational IMPROVEment

This Innovation Insights focuses on the role of the facilitator in an improvement, innovation, project, or similar team. Earlier Innovation Insights have addressed other components of team based innovation and improvement initiatives (see box below). This Innovation Insights addresses:

- The role of the facilitator
- Facilitator responsibilities and functions
- Contracting with a client
- Group dynamics
- Facilitator skills and tools
- Conflict and consensus
- Using all available resources

### The Role of the Facilitator

A team facilitator generally works with a team established to accomplish a specific task or project, not with an ongoing work team. The facilitator assists a team in determining where they are going to go and how they are going to get there. In most project management initiatives, the team knows what they need to implement, but the actual route to and through implementation has not been determined when the team starts work – that is the team's task. In innovation and improvement teams, the team is tasked with determining what innovations and improvements should be implemented to achieve an identified goal or outcome, as well as determining how their recommendations will be implemented.

Although they may use similar interactive approaches, the team facilitator differs from a facilitative trainer. A facilitative trainer knows where he or she expects the group to be at the end of the training session and knows what training objectives will be accomplished.

#### Earlier Innovation Insights have addressed:

Establishing and supporting teams, and the roles of the sponsor and team leader

**Innovation Insights #10** Leading for Continuous Improvement

Penn State's IMPROVE model

**Innovation Insights #7** A Structured Approach to Organizational IMPROVEment

Most useful tools at each step of the IMPROVE model

**Innovation Insights #12** Tools for Organizational IMPROVEment

Meeting management

**Innovation Insights #15** Effective Meetings

Activities within the team can be analyzed in terms of:

- Content - What the team is working on
- Process - How they are going about that work

Generally, team members focus on the content of the team activities, for example, how a unit can improve its internal information flow, or speed up response time for services. The team facilitator provides insight and guidance to the team leader and team members on team processes - how the team is dealing with or could deal with the specific content, tools the team could use such as surveys or focus groups, or how the team could set priorities or make the most effective decisions.

A team facilitator remains content-neutral, and makes minimal content-related input to the group's discussions. This is to ensure that the team retains ownership for the decisions and recommendations it makes. The team facilitator focuses on the group processes, helping the team to have the resources and tools available to make the best decisions it can.

The team facilitator collaborates with the:

- team sponsor - the individual authorizing or charging the team, who controls resources and has the authority to implement changes
- team leader - the individual administratively responsible for the team
- team members - those with knowledge and interest in the initiative or project

Each contributes their knowledge, expertise, and relevant resources to accomplish the goal.

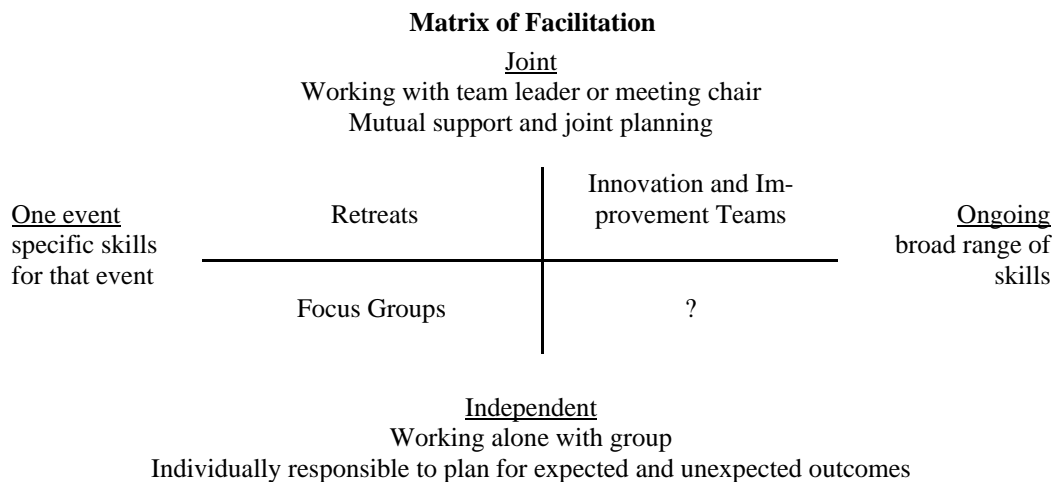
## **Facilitator Responsibilities and Functions**

The International Association of Facilitators' "Foundational Facilitator Competencies" provides one set of responsibilities and functions for a facilitator. This model addresses six areas – client relationships, group process, group participation, outcomes, facilitator development, and facilitator attitude – with several activities identified in each area. A facilitator is responsible to:

- A. Create Collaborative Client Relationships
  - 1) Develop working partnerships
  - 2) Design and customize applications to meet client needs
  - 3) Manage multi-session events effectively
- B. Plan Appropriate Group Processes
  - 1) Select clear methods and processes
  - 2) Prepare time and space to support group processes
- C. Create and Sustain a Participatory Environment
  - 1) Demonstrate effective participatory and interpersonal communication skills
  - 2) Honor and recognize diversity, ensuring inclusiveness
  - 3) Manage group conflict
  - 4) Evoke group creativity
- D. Guide Group to Appropriate and Useful Outcomes
  - 1) Guide group with clear methods and processes
  - 2) Facilitate group self-awareness about its task

- 3) Guide the group to consensus and desired outcomes
- E. Build and Maintain Professional Knowledge
  - 1) Maintain a base of knowledge
  - 2) Know a range of facilitation methods
  - 3) Maintain professional standing
- F. Model Positive Professional Attitude
  - 1) Practice self-assessment and self-awareness
  - 2) Act with integrity
  - 3) Trust group potential and model neutrality

Given the competencies a team facilitator brings to work with a client or team, the first question to be addressed is what the client, sponsor, or team leader is asking the facilitator to facilitate. As shown in the diagram below, it may be a one-time event or ongoing team activities, and the facilitator may be working with a team leader or independently.



A retreat is an example of a one-time event in which the facilitator works with a team or work unit leader. A focus group is also a one-time event, but in this situation, the facilitator works independently, often to protect the confidentiality of individual inputs. It is difficult to imagine how a team facilitator could serve effectively working independently with a team on an ongoing basis, thus the “?” in the lower right quadrant above. The organizational commitment to outcomes and implementation is difficult to identify in this scenario.

While the information in this Innovation Insights could probably be applied to some degree in each of the quadrants, the focus is on ongoing facilitation of an innovation and improvement team in support of a team leader from the team’s work unit.

The facilitator and the client need to be clear about their expectations for both the output and outcome and the process to get to those outputs and outcomes. Some of the issues included in this are confidentiality of group discussions, how to handle items such as safety or legal issues that cannot be kept confidential, and how to keep the client informed of progress.

Contracting with the client, formally or informally, can address these issues.

## Contracting With a Client

Prior to facilitating a session or agreeing to facilitate the ongoing meetings of a team, it is critical that the facilitator meet with the client, generally the team sponsor, and often also the team leader or project leader, to reach agreement on what the client expects from the facilitator, and what resources the client will provide to the facilitator and the team to make accomplishing the outcomes likely.

In *Flawless Consulting*, Block presents a five phase model for consulting, with the first phase to contract with the client. In contracting, the first question to be answered is: What brought the facilitator and client together? If the client contacted the facilitator, then the client can describe what he or she sees as the issue and the facilitator can ensure through discussion that they both have the same understanding. If the facilitator contacted the client, or there is an organizational requirement being met, the facilitator will need to present the issue or opportunity to the prospective client and get feedback and reaction from the client. In all cases, discussion between the client and facilitator should address:

1. What the client wants to have as an outcome
2. What the facilitator is capable of doing or providing
3. What support or commitment the facilitator needs from the client to ensure the desired outcome is reached

In addition, the client and facilitator should reach an agreement on:

1. Outcomes and support
2. Next steps

This discussion addresses both the needs of the client that the facilitator will meet, and the needs of the facilitator that the client must meet in order for the facilitator to be able to work effectively. The facilitator needs to ensure that the client is willing to commit enough time, the right people, and other resources related to the initiative to ensure success.

In an improvement team, much of the information from this discussion may be included in the team's charter, the contract between the sponsor and the team (see Innovation Insights #10, *Leading for Continuous Improvement*). If this is not the case, the facilitator may want to consider a written agreement with the client. This may be as simple as an e-mail between the facilitator and the client confirming what was agreed to at the planning meeting.

Block points out that there may be situations in which the client is not willing to provide what the facilitator needs to ensure a successful event. In those situations, the facilitator and client may not be able to reach agreement and the facilitator may want to end or limit the interaction.

## Group Dynamics

A facilitator needs to be aware of some basics of group dynamics and team development. These forces will be in play at the first meeting.

In 1965, Tuckman published what has become a classic model of group development. Since then, layers have been added to the model to provide more information about how the team and the team's facilitator are interacting.

### Stages of Team Development

Stage	Function	Feelings	Behaviors	Morale	Productivity	Facilitator level of activity
<b>Form</b>	Establish structure, roles, and plans for the team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excitement</li> <li>• Pride</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> <li>• Tentative team attachment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define task</li> <li>• Explore acceptable behavior</li> <li>• Abstract discussions</li> <li>• Complain about barriers</li> </ul>	High	Low	High
<b>Storm</b>	Realization of and resistance to the amount of work that lies ahead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resistance to or changing attitudes about team</li> <li>• Concern</li> <li>• Tension</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arguing</li> <li>• Defensiveness</li> <li>• Competition</li> <li>• Questioning</li> <li>• Disunity</li> </ul>	Low	Starting to rise	High but decreasing
<b>Norm</b>	Acceptance of group norms, roles, and the CQI process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relief</li> <li>• Acceptance of team</li> <li>• Team cohesion</li> <li>• Can achieve goal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendliness</li> <li>• Avoid conflict</li> <li>• Sharing</li> <li>• Establish ground rules</li> </ul>	Rising	Rising	Decreasing
<b>Perform</b>	Work cohesively to achieve its goal of process improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand each others' strengths and weaknesses</li> <li>• Satisfaction with progress</li> <li>• Attachment to team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constructive self-change</li> <li>• Work through problems</li> <li>• Maintain ground rules and boundaries</li> </ul>	High	High	Low

Adapted from: B. Tuckman, "Development Sequence in Small Groups," *Psychological Bulletin*, 1965; R.B. Lacoursiere, *The Life Cycle of Groups: Group Developmental Stage Theory* (New York: Human Service Press, 1980); K. Blanchard, D. Carew, and E. Carew, *The One Minute Manager Builds High Performance Teams* (Blanchard Training and Development, Inc., Escondido, CA, 1990); P.R. Scholtes, et al, *The Team Handbook* (Joiner Associates, Madison, WI, 1996).

It is important to note that while a team may have reached the performing stage, changes such as loss or addition of a member, loss of resources, or a change in schedule may move the team back to the storming stage. Also, since the team is working on a specific task or project, at some point they will come to a fifth stage of "adjourning."

### Facilitator Skills and Tools

One of the prime responsibilities of the facilitator is to assist the team in having effective, productive meetings. The team leader may run the meetings (this is something to discuss in the contracting and planning stage), but it is up to the team facilitator to use his or her expertise to support the team leader. A facilitator assists with both group process and content, but should be cautious to maintain content neutrality. How does the facilitator do this? First, by asking the group a lot of questions and second, by making observations and asking for clarification or confirmation.

The facilitator has a range of skills and tools to use in working with the team and dealing with the dynamics in the group. Since the role of the facilitator is to help an individual or team determine where they want to go and how to get there, it may not be surprising that some of the facilitator's skills are similar to those used in a counseling interaction between two people. These actions, used in either a one-on-one situation or with a group, include:

- Attending behavior - relaxed, natural, eye contact, squared seating, comments which follow group discussion
- Invitation to talk - open-ended questions, non-evaluative
- Minimal encouragement to talk - use to keep discussion going
- Restatement or paraphrase - focus on content, check for understanding
- Reflection of feeling - address feelings in discussion
- Summarize - briefly restate content and feelings from a longer or extended discussion

Open-ended questions invite others to talk by starting with words such as who, when, and what. For example:

- Who else has a thought?
- Who has questions about that?
- What are some examples of that?
- Can anyone give some alternatives for that?

The key is to ask questions that cannot be answered with a 'yes,' 'no,' or one word answer. Try to avoid 'why' questions as they tend to put the respondent on the defensive, asking them to justify their response. Minimal encouragement keeps the discussion going through brief responses from the facilitator such as 'ok,' 'oh,' 'so,' and 'mmhmm,' that show the facilitator is paying attention without interrupting the speaker. Questions such as "Can you tell me more about that?" are also in this category.

In restatement and paraphrasing, the facilitator is confirming that what he or she heard is what the speaker thought they said, by using different words or phrases to rephrase what the speaker said. It gives the speaker an opportunity to clarify what they said, and gives the facilitator and the rest of the group an opportunity to confirm what they heard. Reflecting feelings shows that the listener understands how excited or distressed the speaker was about the information they were relating. Active listening involves listening for both content and feelings.

Finally, the facilitator needs to be able to summarize the essence of discussions individuals or groups have had so that the team can identify the key points and decisions that need to be or have been made.

In a group setting, the facilitator may also be involved in:

- Initiating - get conversation going and keep it going by defining problems, suggesting procedures, proposing tasks, stimulating ideas
- Gate keeping - help to keep communication channels open, bring all into discussion, muffle dominant speakers, encourage non-contributors, ask for input
- Information and opinion seeking - draw out relevant information, opinions, suggestions from the group
- Clarifying and translating - ask for clarification, rephrase
- Mediating - defuse tension between opposing opinions or parties
- Testing consensus - check whether the group is really in agreement
- Encouraging - be friendly, warm, and responsive; use eye contact and verbal or non-verbal assurances

A facilitator can maintain order in the discussion by:

- Stacking – if several people want to speak at the same time, acknowledge all and establish order
- Tracking – if the facilitator hears multiple conversations or topics going on,
  - o Tell the group
  - o Identify and summarize each topic
  - o Check with the group for accuracy on the topics
  - o Help the group handle the topics one at a time
- Balancing – solicit other unexpressed views by asking “Does anyone have a different position?” or “What other thoughts does anyone have on this?” since silence does not always mean consent

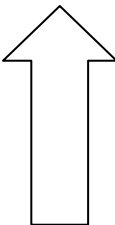
While facilitating the discussion, listen for common ground:

- Tell the group if you are hearing differences and similarities
- Summarize differences
- Summarize similarities
- Check with the group for accuracy

One approach to facilitation is to make observations and statements and seek feedback, confirmation or disagreement. Another approach has the facilitator focus on asking questions. When taking the questioning approach, the facilitator needs to ensure that questions are not loaded or leading, set up to produce a desired or expected answer. The Ladder of Inference is one tool to use to avoid asking questions with hidden meanings.

*The Ladder of Inference*

Perceptions may be or become reality to the person who owns them. Throughout meetings a facilitator will observe many activities in a team, continually deciding whether, when, and how to intervene, respond, or react. The Ladder of Inference provides a way for a facilitator to check perceptions before acting on them. In the adaptation below from Schwarz’s *The Skilled Facilitator*, when the facilitator finds him or herself on a level to the left (starting from the bottom), he or she should ask him or herself the questions on the right before proceeding up to the next step on the left. Asking the questions on the right can reduce the likelihood of making assumptions, coming to a wrong conclusion and taking an inappropriate action.

Steps of the ladder		Facilitator Questions
Decide whether and how to respond		What should I do?
Evaluate, interpret, and explain		What are the person’s reasons for doing or saying this?
Translate and label		What does the data mean?
Select data		What am I paying attention to? Excluding?
Observe data		What do I observe?

Adapted from R. Schwarz, *The Skilled Facilitator* (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, 2002).

## *Ground Rules*

One tool for effective teamwork is ground rules. If the charter is the contract between the team and the team sponsor, ground rules are the contract team members make among themselves to clarify what they can expect from each other. In an ongoing situation, a facilitator may have the group develop their own ground rules. In a one-time event or for a specific task, so the group can focus on the task, the facilitator may bring a list of established ground rules and ask the group to agree to use them.

If the team develops its own ground rules, they are probably developed during the forming and storming stage; their development may be part of the team moving from storming to norming. By the time the team reaches the norming stage, ground rules should be understood, accepted, and followed. This is one of the reasons the role of the facilitator decreases as the team becomes more mature.

Ground rules generally include items that will be relevant at and through each meeting. This can include logistics items, such as starting and ending on time and sticking to the agenda. It can also include interpersonal items, such as listening to others, not interrupting, and not making long speeches.

Ground rules are also the place to address confidentiality and communication with others outside of the team. The team needs to find a balance that will make it possible to get input from or share progress with others but not contribute to rumors, and allow sensitive discussions or trial statements and ideas to remain within the team meetings.

There are short term and long term benefits to having ground rules. In the short term, they help the team make effective use of their time and stay on track. In the longer term they help keep members on the team, because members' expectations for the team have been clarified up front, and they have had a role in determining how the team will operate.

## *Facilitating Team Content*

In addition to managing group processes, the team facilitator assists the team leader with management of the content in the meetings, so that the team progresses toward its goal. These activities to gather and process content related information will be going on in parallel with the team's development, and can include:

- Initiating - Proposing tasks, defining problems, coordinating, clarifying, or suggesting an idea
- Giving information - Providing facts or information to assist the team in making a decision
- Energizing - Motivating the team to make a greater effort
- Evaluating or criticizing - Judging the evidence and conclusions the team suggests

To define and analyze the situation and alternatives, team members may take on the following roles, or the facilitator may ask the whole group to look at the issues from each of the following perspectives:

- Problem stater - clarifies, reminds of questions to answer
- Prober - seeks more info
- Devil's advocate - points out potential problems
- Idea generator - suggests creative solutions

- Model maker - suggests framework for analysis, completion, or new perspective
- Summarizer - points out apparent conclusions for verification and testing

Team content information probably comes from team members (since the facilitator is neutral on content), but the effective team facilitator may draw on different process tools and skills to bring the information out. The general approach is to gather as many ideas and alternatives as possible before the team begins to evaluate them. Once ideas are generated, the team can begin to prioritize them, or evaluate them in terms of established criteria, and narrow down the alternatives.

Remember that if the facilitator takes a position on content, he or she risks losing neutrality. This can include not just offering content-related information, but also acknowledging inputs by using evaluative words such as “good.”

## Conflict and Consensus

Conflict can occur in teams due to difficult people, emotional issues, the rank or status of some individuals, multiple perspectives on an issue, or people who dominate the team through either the tone or quantity of their input to discussions.

Conflict is often thought of negatively. However, conflict is useful when it generates energy, leads to new ideas, leads to improvements, or leads to better understanding and results in unity. The alternative to conflict may be ‘groupthink,’ described by Janis in the book of the same name. In groupthink, team members are isolated, and reinforce and agree with each others’ ideas without questioning or challenging. The result can be disastrous decisions and outcomes.

In *The Team Handbook*, Scholtes and others identify five classic responses to conflict:

- Avoiding - both the issues and the people
- Smoothing - minimize the conflict to maintain the relationship  
Actions of both avoiding and smoothing can include denying that there is a conflict, changing the topic to avoid the issue, or ignoring feelings about the issue; conflict continues out of sight.
- Forcing - use expertise, position or other items to overpower others and force them to accept your position; increases likelihood of future conflict
- Compromising - look for outcome where everyone gains something, but also gives up something; may result in win-lose or lose-lose outcome
- Problem solving - look for win-win approach maintaining goals and relationships

In *Getting to Yes*, Fisher, Ury, and Patton point out that disagreeing individuals often quickly take adversarial positions which make discussion difficult or impossible. Shifting the discussion to their interests, what they desire as components or characteristics of the solution, may make discussion and resolution possible.

From the interpersonal perspective, guidelines to resolving conflict include:

- Avoid attacking the individual; preserve dignity and self respect
- Focus on the topic
- Stick to facts and data – be specific
- Listen - with empathy and in the other person’s shoes

- Express your perspective
- Ask questions and restate to clarify
- Look for areas of agreement
- Remember the common interests and goals
- Don't expect to change another's behavioral style

The goal from the facilitator's perspective is reaching consensus ("collective opinion; general accord; agreement" from *Webster's II New College Dictionary*, 1995) on significant decisions. Compromise is quicker than consensus, but will probably have less support from group members. Working for consensus and a win-win outcome can lead to synergy - the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and a team can produce better ideas than the same individuals working independently. In addition, reaching consensus will lead to stronger team member support of the decisions they have made.

In *Continuous Quality Improvement in Higher Education*, Dew and Nearing share the LUIS model used at Binghamton University to define and provide a means to reach an effective decision.

- I can Live with this decision
- I Understand this decision
- I was Involved in this decision
- I will Support this decision

The following actions can help a team reach consensus on an effective decision:

- Include everyone in the discussion
- Encourage expression of differences
- Clarify issues for understanding
- Promote open discussion of all ideas
- Avoid majority or minority rule voting
- Be wary of quick agreement
- Allow plenty of time
- Aim for a win-win scenario
- Place emphasis on understanding other points of view

All participants have been included on the team because they have useful contributions to make. It is the facilitator's job to create an environment that enables those contributions.

## Using All Available Resources

The facilitator is a resource for process consultation, but is probably not the expert for all possible topics and issues. A facilitator should know when to call upon other expert resources, and whom to contact. This may be particularly important regarding issues relating to human resources, legal, or safety issues.

## Summary

When all aspects of facilitating a meeting are integrated into one process, the complete cycle of functions and activities of a team facilitator will include:

- Before the meeting
  - Planning
  - Clarifying expectations and desired outcomes
  - Identifying and obtaining resources
- During the meeting
  - Enabling the process
  - Remaining neutral
  - Maintaining group focus
  - Dealing with conflict
  - Enabling open communication, information sharing, problem solving, and decision making
- After the meeting
  - Providing feedback
  - Planning for next steps
  - Checking for follow through or scheduling a follow-up meeting

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