

Co-facilitating



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Key learning points

- **Characteristics of co-facilitation.**
- **Developing to be co-facilitators.**
- **Operating as co-facilitators.**

Introduction

Co-facilitation is the way we run all our 'soft' skills learning events. This article is based on our experience over the past ten years. The basis of that experience has been three people, each of them paired with each of the other two. This was broadened to six people, but not all of them worked with all of the others. This has given us a richness of experience that we have distilled into this article.

What is co-facilitating?

Let's start with what it is not. Co-facilitating is not splitting up the training so that you do this and I do that. Such an approach is just a matter of two trainers being in the room at the same time, one of them training and

one of them not training. Of course, that is how it may start.

Co-facilitating is two facilitators in the room, one leading and the other following and supporting, and the follower seamlessly taking the lead as appropriate. Sometimes this is prearranged and sometimes it just happens because it is appropriate. Both the trainers are facilitating all the time, directly or supportively. Both the trainers are fully able in all aspects of the content and process of the facilitation, each identifying with the style of the other. It takes time and trust to build this relationship, and each learns much from the other.

Let's also be clear about facilitation. To us, a facilitator is somebody who assists people to learn. This means we know what the participants want to be able to do, and we often have no idea what each person in the group needs to learn, to reach the point where they can perform. We believe that this is being learner centred as far as possible, and we have learned what works for most people and how we can help.

Characteristics of a facilitator in co-facilitation

Let's explore the characteristics of a facilitator, and then see how this applies to co-facilitation. Our experience indicates that being a facilitator requires some naturally, or formally, learned personal dimensions.

Acceptance

The facilitator accepts that others are different from them – they have different goals, beliefs and personality and, consequently, they behave differently.

Rapport

The facilitator has the skill to build rapport with the people whose learning they are facilitating. That requires a relationship based on mutual trust, and a sharing within which a suggestion is accepted. The deeper manifestation of this is an emotional bond and ability to empathise, to experience the other person's situation from their point of view, not our own. Of course, we can never feel what another person feels, but an empathetic person can, at least, get close.

Into action

Most co-facilitation problems seem to occur because the facilitators have not spent time in planning and preparation. Some problems occur because the facilitators are still on the learning curve. This is the only acceptable reason for having problems. Of course, some people believe there are problems arising from the participants. Dual facilitation is valuable here. One handles the problem and the other handles the rest of the participants. Can this mess up the plan? Yes. But this is no real problem. True partners who have planned in advance will know how to take action.

A co-facilitator must remain alert and attentive through the other facilitator's sessions, in order to provide assistance when needed.

Staying sharp

It is essential that the co-facilitators continually reinforce their skills. Here are some tips:

- Debrief before you leave the venue.
- Discuss what worked well and listen carefully to the proposals.
- Listen carefully to each other's self-evaluation of what was done well, before building on, and adding to, what the other facilitator did well. Be specific, give feedback in terms of behaviour and then give the observed results that stemmed from it.
- Feed forward, discuss what you could do differently.
- Suggest changes you want from your co-facilitator, be specific, give examples.
- Accept the feedback, don't defend; then create goals and process from it.

Advantages of co-facilitating

Complementing orientations or styles	vs.	Competing orientations or styles
Prevents overwhelming participants	vs.	Over-intervening
Development and support	vs.	Competition
Effective behaviour	vs.	Ineffective behaviour
Synergy	vs.	Expending extra energy

What is being facilitated?

Clearly, some learning situations would not be suitable for co-facilitation, and others need co-facilitation. Let's look at the guidelines in order to decide. If the learning event meets the following criteria, co-facilitation should be considered.

The learning is designed so that:

- people define their own objectives within defined outcomes
- participants share relevant information and/or experience
- participants give each other feedback
- participants feel personally responsible for their decisions and learning
- the learning is experiential
- coaching of individuals occurs within the context of the group learning.

Conclusion

Co-facilitation is not the same as joint training. We believe that co-facilitating is superior to working alone. Together, we are able to facilitate both the group and the individual learning. Simply, 'Two heads are better than one'. Co-facilitators need to develop a synergistic effect; when that happens, the total effect of the training exceeds the individual sum of the inputs. Again the question is, why? That's the reason for co-facilitation. To build a working relationship takes time, practice, and mutual respect and understanding. It requires planning, preparation, acceptance, rapport, congruence and flexibility. Most important of all for us, we love working together.

Author

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Congruence

The facilitator is aware of what they are doing and feeling, and able to convey this simply to others.

Flexibility

The facilitator has a maturity that enables them to avoid dogmatism, authoritarianism and rigidity. Consequently, they are flexible.

These prime characteristics that enable the learning facilitator are also key to co-facilitation. They determine the **personal orientation** that the facilitators have when working together.

What other orientation is necessary?

Communication orientation

This comprises the behaviours that help the co-facilitators to operate as a team and indicate that they are working at working together. The behaviours may include encouraging, expressing feelings, compromising, communicating, reconciling disagreements, respecting values and beliefs, and meeting agreed standards of performance.

Task orientation

This is about the practical way of working together in order to meet the goals of the facilitation task. The behaviours may include setting goals, seeking information, giving information, seeking and giving clarification, and the other interactive skills. They also include the elements of the systematic approach to meeting the learning, from learning needs analysis to evaluation.

What is the process for becoming co-facilitators?

The process of becoming co-facilitators, like that of many successful teams, follows a pattern of **forming, storming, norming** and **performing**. Before we consider the process, let's make explicit an important precondition for selecting

team members. We shall use the example of our own team. Before we trained together, we knew one another. We liked one another, and we think that helped. We also respected one another as subject-matter experts or trainers or thinkers. Some of us were very experienced trainers, and some were not as experienced. Some of us had worked in highly-controlled training environments akin to programmed learning, and some had coaching and counselling experience. We believe a variety of background is important, but more important is the belief that there is no one right way, that the process and methods will evolve. So the first step is the right attitude of consideration for others (**personal orientation**).

Forming

Like all teams, you will probably find that you move through the forming stage when you build rapport with each other, becoming clear about the objectives of the approach you are taking as a pair and what each of you brings to the team. One person may emerge as the leader and the other as the follower, and in this early stage this may be characterised by dependence that will fade and disappear.



Storming

At some stage, you will disagree. The important factor is how you handle it. Our experience is that the solution lies in openness and talking it through, and in not taking entrenched positions. The difference of opinion shared is a source of energy – not right and wrong, but rather options and decisions. The aim is clarification, followed by understanding towards empathy.

Norming

While you are working together as pairs, operating norms emerge. Some can be set beforehand. For example, it would be a good rule that the

facilitators never disagree, or even appear to disagree, in front of the participants. Agree a protocol for the supporting facilitator to move into prime position if they see the need, and for the lead facilitator to hand over for some purpose. As the rapport deepens, you each begin to understand those values and beliefs of the other person that impinge on the processes of facilitation. It is useful to have no observable status differences between the facilitators. The output of this stage is closer co-operation, a bonding and a pattern of behaviour that identifies the co-facilitators as a team. This is reinforced by feedback.

Performing

You are now performing – not just to the norms that have been put in place, but on a continual evolution, so new approaches and risks can be taken.

Give regular feedback on what your co-facilitator did that helped the participants learn, and what helped the co-facilitation work well. Notice that the emphasis is on reinforcing behaviours. Over time, this causes a sound way of operating to emerge. We all know when we have got it wrong, so tell your co-facilitator you know you got it wrong and what you want to do differently next time. The essence of co-facilitation is knowing that, whatever happens, your co-facilitator will be supporting you, giving you reinforcing feedback and feeding forward to enhance the facilitation.

Co-facilitation in action

As solo facilitators, the stage is yours to work on as you choose. As a twin – and co-facilitators have to be operative twins – you must have a way of operating. Let's consider the elements, some of which have been alluded to above.

Planning

Follow a systematic approach. Be clear about the purpose and the outcomes you expect each participant to achieve, and about the target population and entry-level requirements. Plan the learning-event content and process together and, just as importantly, the process of working together as co-facilitators.

It is vital to establish what topics or sections of the workshop each facilitator will lead. This can be quite detailed. For example, if one facilitator is describing an exercise, the other facilitator may be giving out briefing sheets. Both facilitators may then answer questions and help at an individual level, so both are active simultaneously. It is useful to decide where each will sit during the session. The purpose of this planning is not to control the session, but to ensure full understanding so deviation can be handled easily. If you don't know what you are supposed to be doing, and your co-facilitator is in the same boat, then chaos will undoubtedly reign.

Plan who will open and close the workshop. This is important, as the participants will assume that there is a hierarchy in the facilitators. Plan to rotate the

facilitation at least every hour. We have found that short rotations work much better than long ones. Look for natural breaks in the material and plan your breaks for these moments.

Preparation

It is often said that a dress rehearsal will avoid misunderstandings. But if you are learner centred, then only the core of the predecided input can be rehearsed. You can only guess how one person, let alone a whole group, will respond, and what changes that response will engender.

We now know where the participants will end up at the finish of a learning event, and we have learned to be flexible and relaxed. We know we can help them learn what they need to learn to meet their objectives.

Although it is hard to rehearse, it is very important to prepare and make certain you are on top of your plan. Share what innovations you are going to make. Make certain you are both conversant and happy with the way you want things to go. Check the logistics and administration – such as making sure the room layout is as it should be and paperwork is prepared and delivered.

