

Content-free learning facilitation

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Key learning points

- The facilitator's approach, role and actions in content-free facilitation.
- The interactive behaviours required.
- When and how to intervene.

We have, on a number of occasions, been asked as trainers to facilitate a group so that they can learn professional and technical skills from each other – for example, a group of surgeons or a group of software consultants. We have no technical or professional expertise in their areas of knowledge. Undoubtedly, other trainers are faced with this form of training, which we have called content-free learning facilitation.

The group's goal

The facilitation is in the Socratic tradition; that is, the group is being facilitated to reach **their truth**. The purpose is for the group to share explicit and tacit knowledge, building on their existing experience and expertise. The output may be in the form of a process, a set of rules, skills to be learned or

applied, and so on. It is vital that the participants, or the instigator of the learning event, state the output required. The facilitator's role is to help the group reach **their** solutions – to the required standards, in the required time (see Figure 1).

The facilitator's role

For us, a facilitator is somebody who assists people to learn. Facilitation is, in essence, listening (active and empathetic¹) to what people say, responding only to what they say in order to help them structure their thoughts to produce their required outputs.

There is no planned or pre-decided input. The facilitator does not give their ideas. The facilitator does not manipulate the group to reach some given or personal outcome. In short, the facilitator is totally neutral.

It can be argued that the best facilitator goes into a learning group in total ignorance of the subject, but with the interactive skills shown in the box. Reality dictates that facilitators will give information, but only on the observations made about the

progress and behaviour of the group and group members. This implies that facilitators have high levels of behavioural and group process skills.

In a well-functioning group the facilitator may be silent for long periods.

Interactive skills required²

The prime behaviours used by the facilitator are:

- seeking clarification
- clarifying
- testing own understanding
- reflecting and paraphrasing
- summarising
- seeking information
- seeking feelings
- reflecting feelings
- seeking content proposals
- seeking process proposals
- building on proposals
- making process proposals
- making process suggestions
- listening (actively and empathetically)
- supporting
- challenging
- bringing in
- shutting out
- silence.

How to intervene

As we have already said, pick a time when the intervention flows naturally. It is best to flag what form of behaviour you are going to use. For example, 'I'd like to seek some information' or, 'I'd like some clarification'. That enables the group members to gear themselves for what is coming. Having executed the behaviour you have flagged, and handled any response from it, you can continue as you have the floor. Remember, the greatest power for a facilitator comes from well-directed 'seeking' behaviour and factual summary, with appropriate statements matching the participants' views or values without agreeing or disagreeing. Also remember that comments like 'I can see you agree with that' and 'Does that trouble you?' often disarm defensive reactions. Statements that contain a note of criticism, or imply a need to improve, may provoke defence or opposition. This makes phrasing extremely important. Saying you are not criticising is nearly always taken as an indication that you are about to criticise or, at the very least, sensitises the person to listen for criticism. This leaves questioning as the safest route. Questions do have their problems. Groups sometimes become suspicious of questions. They can hear them as a trap. This comes about if the questions at some stage have been intended to elicit an answer that the facilitator is seeking. The response from the group members may be one of 'Why don't you just tell us?'.

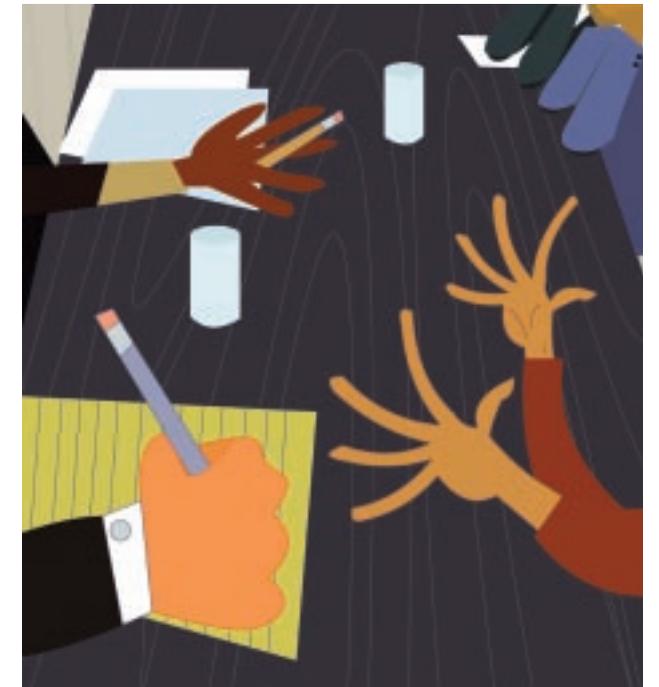
The last point is about the effectiveness of the intervention. What may be obvious to you may not be obvious to the group members. What may be simple to you may be extremely difficult for the group members. This means that interventions have to start where the group is at.

Conclusion

In this article we have attempted to give you the elements of our experience in content-free facilitation. The key elements that we have explored above are your role, the language you may find useful, and how and when to intervene.

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The ideal situation is for the group to facilitate themselves. This is the next stage in sophistication, and it requires the group members to come together regularly and you to impart to them, over time, the behavioural and process skills explored above.

References

- 1 See 'It's good to listen', *Train the Trainer*, Issue 20.
- 2 See 'Behavioural Analysis in Training', *Train the Trainer*, Issue 23.
- 3 See 'Training, Development and Education', *Training Journal*, November 2003.

Some dos and don'ts

Don't explicitly correct mistakes
Do direct attention to anomalies and inconsistencies

Play the innocent when doing this. For example, 'I'm not sure that I am clear; on the one hand I heard X and on the other I heard Y.' Note the 'I' language. In this situation, avoid 'you' language, as it may trigger defence. Irrespective of what you say and do next, you will have 'lost it'.

Don't express an opinion

Stick to what was said and use the language of the person. It is not the facilitator's role to agree or disagree, or to make content proposals or content suggestions. Facilitators are independent, external and helping.

Do use the person's representational language

A person may say 'I can't see why we should have to spend that much' (*visual*), or 'I don't hear the reasons for spending that much' (*auditory*), or 'I feel we may have to spend that much' (*kinaesthetic*) or 'I don't think we should spend that much' (*cognitive*). By your use of their language, they will hear what you say, see what that conjures up, feel agreeable about it, or follow the logic or thinking process. If you use a different language, the person may not relate to what you are saying.

Don't answer questions about the subject

Facilitators are not experts in the subject matter being discussed by the participant. Even if we were experts, this is not a course; it is *their* event using *their* subject matter in accordance with *their* needs.

The secret is to use their ideas to prompt their thinking. Your view is just another opinion that, if not adopted, will lose you credibility. If it is accepted, they have lost ownership and you have failed as a facilitator.

**Prompt process thinking by being non-directive**

For example, ask, 'What are you trying to achieve?' not, 'What are your objectives?'. Build from what they say: 'So tell me the sorts of things you will do'. Note that this is still non-specific and that it is compelling ('tell me').

Point out the effect of useful behaviours

You may have to indicate the content to jog the person's memory, but don't give specifics. For example, 'When you "brought in" Anne, she made an accepted proposal about the retractors'. The important thing is the behaviour, (bringing in), and the effect of the bringing in, in this case a content proposal.

Feed back unstated assumptions

These may seem to underlie a discussion. Do this anonymously to the group. For example, you might say 'It appeared to me that the main assumptions underlying the interactions were that fat girls eat too much and fat boys exercise too little'. Such feedback can provoke reactions such as, 'That's a load of old toffee; I don't believe that'. This is a golden opportunity: 'Oh! I am sorry, I misunderstood. What were your assumptions?'. This works on the principle that if somebody knows what they did not do, they may know what they did. Note that the

assumption statement made is the minimum – no explanation, no value judgements, just a statement of observations.

Values and beliefs are another area of neutral anonymous feedback to a group. You might say something like, 'It seems to me to be a belief in the group that the junior managers can't be trusted'. Such a statement may be true, but is liable to be challenged. Have evidence in case you are challenged; for example, 'One of you said we had better monitor ... , another of you said ...'. Note that there are no names, but clear evidence. Only volunteer the evidence if challenged.

What are the main problems?

You may feel the need to say something. It's OK not to say anything. Most trainers are 'programmed' to tell people things. Just stay silent.

You will see what you expect to see, hear what you expect to hear, and feel what you expect to feel. That may not be what is before you. Observation is the key. Dumping your own values and preconceptions will enable you to see and hear what is there. You may need to have some mechanism to achieve this.

- 1 Introduce yourself and take actions to build rapport with the group.
- 2 Explain your role as the learning facilitator.
- 3 Introduce the participants to each other (icebreaker) in a way that causes them to be relaxed with each other.
- 4 Facilitate an agreement on the outcomes to be achieved and the order of their achievement.
- 5 Facilitate the process of achieving each outcome, reinforcing the learning at each stage towards an outcome.
- 6 Facilitate the acquisition of behaviours that will aid the interactive learning for members within the group.
- 7 Identify roles that members are adopting and use this to facilitate the learning further.
- 8 Facilitate the next step after the learning event that will consolidate the learning.

Fig. 1: The learning event process

Hints and tips

The issue is how to help the group of people observe their own behaviours, so that they can learn to be more effective without your imposing an external model. The main tool is probably the question. The answer is often irrelevant to you. The question prompts the participants' thinking. Remember that groups are often immersed in content; they think little about process. That's where you can help. But one purpose of your review is to get them to become aware of the behaviours they used in the interactions and the behaviour of the others. What behaviours and process the participant used is the issue. Behaviours that lead to success are important because they are likely to be repeated (people learn from success; they learn what not to do from mistakes or failure).

How do we help people work better together?

One of the most valuable lessons that people who are not working particularly well together can learn is that others have different, but equally valuable, mental models. For example, we were at a meeting with a director of a training company. His mental

model of training was courses, and development was the learning that occurs on the job. He saw training and development as subsumed under the heading of 'education'.³ This may be a primitive model, but it worked for him. Telling him that it is a primitive model would not be productive. In the review situation, it is useful to attempt to draw out mental models. For example, you might say 'It seems to me that both Mark and Margaret are very successful, and appear to see this sort of situation very differently. What is your model, Mark?'

How to help people recognise that they are OK.

Just support them naturally. They say what they think; you say, 'I understand that'. You don't agree or disagree. All you can do is support. It is the 'reflect back where they are at' technique. Gladys says 'I'm really angry with Compcoc.' You say 'Yes, I can see that you are upset'. Then wait. The real danger is in operating at the factual level and asking a question such as 'Why is that, then?'. Such a question would move Gladys into fact, breaking the rapport by ignoring or – worse – not even recognising that Gladys has made a statement about her feelings. The reflecting emotions approach often results in the person moving into statement, and consequently towards rationality, as they are talking to themselves as much as to you. People have a right to be emotional, but it is probably not productive if the emotion is negative.

Support and challenge

Somebody says, 'I'd like to try to X more'. You may say, 'That sounds useful' (support). 'How will you do that?' (challenge). The challenge moves the person forward to a decision or action.

Observing and group progress

You see the proceedings from a different viewpoint than that of members of the group. This is where you have an advantage. They are involved in content and you can focus on process. To take advantage of your position two things are required:

- 1 You must be acceptable to the group.
- 2 You must intervene in the group.

This raises a number of issues.

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When to intervene

Immediately or after some delay? There is contradictory advice about this. We know that immediate intervention (immediacy) has much greater impact on changing behaviour than delay. At the same time, the likelihood of rejection is also higher. Always intervene if some safety situation or falling foul of the law is involved, or the course of events will lead to damage or personal harm. This is a judgement call. Usually it is better not to intervene until it is clear that no member of the group will apply a correction. Never intervene when the group is in full flood, or intensely engaged in an activity. Picking the time is crucial. The best time is when the intervention will follow naturally from what has just been said. This brings us to the next point.