

Information Management Resource Kit

Module on Building Electronic Communities and Networks

UNIT 5. ONLINE FACILITATION

LESSON 1. THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

NOTE

Please note that this PDF version does not have the interactive features offered through the IMARK courseware such as exercises with feedback, pop-ups, animations etc.

We recommend that you take the lesson using the interactive courseware environment, and use the PDF version for printing the lesson and to use as a reference after you have completed the course.



Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- describe the role of the facilitator of traditional and online communities.



Introduction



Facilitation is about **helping and supporting a group to achieve their desired objectives** in an impartial manner.

In this lesson you will be introduced to the main facilitation principles that are valid for both traditional and online communities.

Why is a facilitator needed?

A meeting is taking place at the communication department of a big organization. A group of colleagues have to define the marketing strategy for the next year. But the discussion is not flowing...



See next slide to know what people are really thinking

As a result, the group has been meeting for four hours without taking any decisions.

Why is a facilitator needed?

Alain Why have I been involved in this meeting? I'm not interested in marketing and I have a lot of things to do....

Pablo I would like to express my ideas, but I'm not an expert... I don't want to make a bad impression...

Jeanne I feel we are not discussing the core issues... It's not clear what we have to do!

Claire Denise acts like she is the boss! My suggestions are useful... Why doesn't she listen to me?

Denise The strategy I proposed was so clear! Now we aren't going anywhere!

As a result, the group has been meeting for four hours without taking any decisions.

Why is a facilitator needed?



Just putting a group of people together in the same room or online space does not guarantee that they will work together effectively or that they will achieve the results they desire.

In order to be effective, groups need to have a **shared sense of purpose and motivation** to achieving this purpose, whatever the reason that brings them together.

EFFECTIVE GROUPS

Effective groups also have:

- clarity of roles;
- ground rules and commitments;
- understanding of group processes;
- interest in listening to each other and resolving conflict;
- focus on problem solving rather than competition; and
- effective decision making processes.

Without **trust**, most of these characteristics are unlikely to be present.

Effective groups also tend to have a very strong shared sense of **group identity**, in the eyes of its members and those outside the group.

What is the role of the facilitator?



The role of the facilitator is **to make it easier for groups to work together and achieve their goals.**

In our example, what do you think a facilitator could say to help the group?

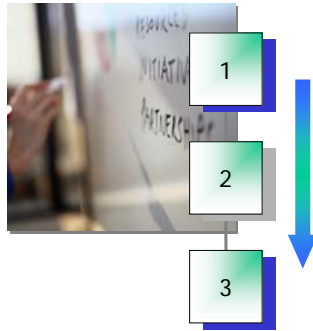
I will write all your suggested marketing actions on the board. Then everyone will be asked to vote on the priorities.

The actions 3, 4 and 6 from those you have suggested are priorities for the marketing strategy. Let's focus on them.



Please select the answer of your choice

What is the role of the facilitator?



The goals of a group may be very specific, such as making decisions or planning work, or they may be general, such as networking and general discussion.

In either case, **a facilitator is concerned with process rather than content.**

What is the role of the facilitator?

The role of a facilitator differs from that of a leader, manager or trainer.

Can you assign the relevant roles to each of them?

| | | | |
|---|------------------|---|---|
| a | Leader / Manager | Helps groups take processes forward together collectively | 1 |
| | Trainer | Steers groups in particular directions | |
| | Facilitator | Transfers specific skills and knowledge to people | |

Click on each option, drag it and drop it in the corresponding box.
When you have finished, click on the Check Answer button.

What is the role of the facilitator?

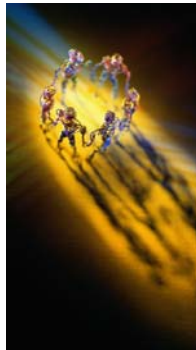
How do facilitators help groups achieve their goals?

They do it by...



- Clarifying and reinforcing the purpose of the group
- Creating a welcoming and inclusive environment that encourages trust between participants
- Providing and managing a "structure" for the group: developing an agenda and appropriate group activities
- Helping to build relationships between group members
- Keeping the discussion focused
- Helping and motivating the group to move forward to reach its goals
- Ensuring that everyone has a chance to be heard
- Managing conflicts and acknowledging differences
- Helping to ensure understanding
- Drawing out and summarizing the discussion

What is the role of the facilitator?



Background aspects of facilitation

Facilitation is not always noticeable to the group. Some aspects of facilitation take place in the background, such as providing extra support to individual participants or changing seating arrangements to make interaction easier.

Everything a facilitator says or does (intentionally or otherwise) affects the facilitation process.

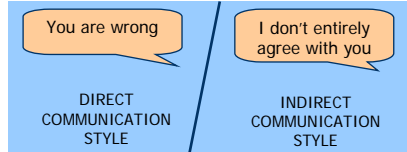
For example, a facilitator can ask participants to introduce themselves (an intentional act to make the participants more comfortable with each other) or unintentionally make a comment which makes some participants less comfortable in the group.

Communication styles

Facilitators must be aware of how individual communication styles affect how individuals interact within a group. The term **communication style** refers to the way in which we send messages to others.

Our communication style includes...

...**how direct we are** in communicating messages.



...which messages we communicate **in public** and which we communicate **in private**.

For example, one person who disagrees with their director's proposal might communicate this only in private; another might be comfortable voicing their disagreement in public.



Communication styles

Our communication style also includes...

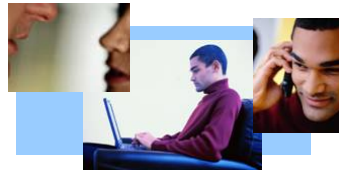


...**how formal our use of language is**, and how different our language is with different groups.

For example, one person might always address their boss very formally, another might address their boss in the same way they address other colleagues.

...our preferred **mode of communicating**.

For example, whether we prefer to communicate face-to-face, online, or by telephone.



Our communication style is influenced by factors such as gender, culture, status, age, personality and whether we are communicating online or offline. It also includes non-textual factors such as tone of voice and gestures.

Communication styles

Imagine that Sarah, one of your colleagues, proposes the redevelopment of your online community's Web site.



Our Web site is no longer appropriate, we need to redesign it as soon as possible!

I have written a proposal: can you have a look at it and let me know what you think...

You read the proposal.

You think it is poorly conceived, and the timing is inappropriate...

Communication styles

How would you respond to Sarah?

I don't think it has been thought through clearly – but at any rate, we are not going to undertake a redesign this year.

This is rubbish! Why don't you think before you waste my time?

This is an interesting proposal, but we are not quite ready for a redesign.



Click on the balloons to see the colleague's reactions to your responses

Communication styles

How do you respond to Sarah?

I don't think it has been thought through clearly – but at any rate, we are not going to undertake a redesign this year.

This is rubbish! Why don't you think before you waste my time?

This is an interesting proposal, but we are not quite ready for a redesign.

OK...my proposal is not clear. I will work on it for the future.



COMMENT

You are exhibiting a direct, assertive style.

This response may work, especially for your colleague, who seems to have quite a direct communication style.

Communication styles

How do you respond to Sarah?

I don't think it has been thought through clearly – but at any rate, we are not going to undertake a redesign this year.

This is rubbish! Why don't you think before you waste my time?

This is an interesting proposal, but we are not quite ready for a redesign.

It was not necessary to be so rude!



COMMENT

You are exhibiting a direct but aggressive style.

Your colleague will think you are intentionally rude or hostile.

Communication styles

How do you respond to Sarah?

I don't think it has been thought through clearly – but at any rate, we are not going to undertake a redesign this year.

This is rubbish! Why don't you think before you waste my time?

This is an interesting proposal, but we are not quite ready for a redesign.

Well, with a bit of work this proposal might be accepted!



COMMENT

You are trying to provide a “positive” message (“this is an interesting proposal”), even if it is not entirely accurate, to balance the negative one (rejecting the proposal). If you and your colleague were “playing by the same rules” – in other words, sharing a similar indirect communication style – the colleague might see your response as a polite but firm rejection of the proposal. In this example, as Sarah has a more direct communication style, she might interpret your response as encouraging.

Communication styles



As we have seen in the example, communication style also affects the way we **receive** messages.

We are likely to interpret messages others send us through the lens of our own communication style, culture and experience.

This can sometimes lead us to misunderstand both the **content** of what others say, and their **intentions**.

For example...

If I have a very indirect communication style, I might think that someone with a more direct style is intentionally rude or hostile.

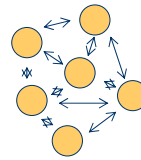
If I have a very direct communication style, I might take other people's statements at “face value”, without considering that further interpretation may be needed.

Group dynamics



Facilitators need to be aware both of the communication styles of the individuals who make up the group, and of the way the group interacts as a whole.

The way in which the group works together, and the way in which group members work with each other constitute the **group dynamic**.



Group dynamics

The interaction of communication styles, relationships and personal factors such as gender, age, culture, and class all influence the group's dynamics.



As individuals, we bring into a group:

- our individual communication styles;
- our needs;
- our preferences and prejudices about people and other cultures;
- the worries we have outside the group; and
- our feelings about the group itself – about its purpose, about its individual members, and about how we see our place within the group.

Group dynamics

All of those factors influence our behaviour within the group. The task of the facilitator is to ensure that:



Individual needs and differences are acknowledged and respected, but that they do not dominate or derail group processes.



Individuals with different communication styles can still communicate effectively with each other without misunderstandings.



Individual members are "aligned" with the group – that group members share a common sense of purpose and are committed to both the goals of the group and to the processes for reaching those goals.

Thinking about your group

Communication styles: Do the members have similar communication styles, or do you see misunderstandings caused by different communication styles?

Gender: Is there a gender balance? How does lack of gender balance influence group communication?

Relationships: Are there political or other alliances in the group? Are these alliances known to all the members of the group?

Cultural diversity: How culturally diverse is the group, and how does this affect group communication?

Facilitator bias: What is your own communication style? Direct or indirect? Formal or informal? Structured or spontaneous? How could this affect your group? How are you perceived by the group in terms of your affiliations, gender, age and culture and what are your own biases towards the group, its goals, and the content of discussions?

Facilitation skills

We have talked about the overall role of the facilitator.

The specific tasks which a facilitator needs to perform will depend on:

- the **purpose of the group** (discussion without time limitation, planning meeting, working group etc.); and
- the **nature of the group** (multicultural/multilingual, whether the participants already know each other, power relations outside the group etc.).



For example, a group where most participants don't know each other will require actively facilitated "getting to know you" activities. These are not necessary if participants already know each other.

Facilitation skills

In any case, an effective facilitator needs skills and knowledge in at least five areas:

Knowledge of group dynamics and processes

The facilitator needs to understand the basic principles of groups and group processes both online and off. For example, what makes groups effective? What are communication styles, and how do they affect group dynamics? What issues are there around cross-cultural communication?

Skills in process design and management

The facilitator should be able to apply his/her knowledge of group dynamics and principles – e.g. techniques to get a group familiar and comfortable, and design and manage processes to help the group achieve its objectives.

Knowledge of the subject matter of your online community

The facilitator doesn't need to be an expert on the subject the group is focused on, but he/she needs at least a basic understanding of the topics under discussion.

Communication and interpersonal skills

Communication and interpersonal skills are crucial for a facilitator. See the next screens to know more about these important communication skills.

Skills and knowledge relating to tools

The facilitator should be able to use the tools and equipment which support the group, and know where to get assistance if things go wrong. In face-to-face environments, for example, the facilitator might need to know how to use an overhead projector or sound system; in an online community he/she will need to be familiar with the online workspace tools such as listserv and bulletin boards.

Depending on the purpose of your community or group, a facilitator may also need other skills and knowledge.

Facilitation skills



Quite often we are unaware that miscommunication has taken place. We think that we have conveyed our messages clearly or that we have understood what other people have said – when in fact the messages have not been understood.

Active listening helps us to identify and clarify miscommunication as soon as it occurs, to respond to messages effectively, and to show respect for the speaker.

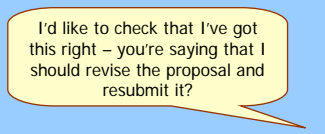
Active listening is probably the most important characteristic of an effective facilitator.

Active listening is not just about "hearing" what is said. It means focusing on the communication and ensuring that you have accurately interpreted the message the sender wants to convey.

Facilitation skills

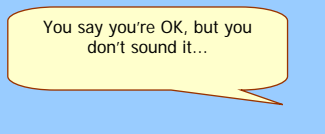
Active listening involves...

Checking for meaning: this includes techniques such as asking good open-ended questions to help expand or clarify meaning, paraphrasing what you have heard to check whether you have understood correctly.



I'd like to check that I've got this right – you're saying that I should revise the proposal and resubmit it?

Looking beyond the words: in face-to-face encounters, this might mean looking for cues such as tone of voice and physical posture which support or contradict the actual words spoken, and trying to draw the speaker out through questions or observations.



You say you're OK, but you don't sound it...

Active listening also involves **listening for what is not said** and **focusing on the speaker** and not constantly interrupting.

Facilitation skills

OTHER COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Modelling: modelling means demonstrating, through your own behaviour, behaviour which you would like others to copy: "leading by example" or acting as a role model in your behaviour towards the group. For example, by modelling active listening techniques you help to "train" group members to be active listeners themselves, and by dealing effectively with conflict you equip the group with tools for conflict resolution.

Summarizing: summarizing involves extracting the key points from a discussion, organizing them, and restating them concisely.

Observing: being able to watch and interpret what is happening in the group, looking at both individuals and at the group as a whole.

Impartiality: in order to gain the trust of all community members, a facilitator needs to be seen to be as impartial as possible, and not perceived to be favouring the interests of any particular group or individual within the community.

Adaptability and flexibility: an effective facilitator needs to be able to respond appropriately to changing circumstances, rather than sticking to a pre-determined programme no matter what.

Encouraging participants, recognizing progress, and acknowledging and celebrating achievements.

Self-awareness: one of the most valuable attributes of a facilitator is self-awareness. In order to understand other people's communication styles and to help people communicate effectively you need to be aware of how you communicate. As a facilitator you bring your own communication style and biases into the online group dynamic. Your style and biases will be more compatible with some participants than with others.

Summary

Facilitation is the key to building and sustaining an effective group.

The main role of the facilitator is to help groups achieve their goals.

The facilitator is concerned with process more than content.

A facilitator must be aware of the different communication styles in a group, and of group dynamics.

A facilitator uses communication skills such as active listening to help the group move forward in reaching its goals.

If you want to know more...

Online Resources

Bellanet. Community of Practice Facilitation
http://www.bellanet.org/itrain/materials_en.cfm

Carter McNamara. Facilitation (Face-to-Face and On-Line)
http://www.mapnp.org/library/grp_skill/facilitate/facilitate.htm

CSAP. Module 3: Facilitation skills.
<http://p2001.health.org/CTW12/ctw12t1.htm>

Full Circle Associates. Defining the purpose of your community
<http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communitypurpose.htm>

Full Circle Associates. Facilitator Qualities and Skills
<http://www.fullcirc.com/community/facilitatorqualities.htm>

Bibliography

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Paul, J. 1995. The Personal Elements of Effective Communities. In Gozdz, K. (Ed.) 1995. Community building: renewing spirit and learning in business. San Francisco, USA, New Leaders Press.

Schwarz, Roger M. 2002. The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches, Second Edition.