

The Role of Facilitators and Staff in Supporting Collaborative Teams



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Introduction

Increasingly, teams of individuals interested in enhancing the effectiveness of the justice system are establishing collaborative teams to address issues of common concern. The success of these teams depends on a number of factors. Collaborative teams must be appropriately composed, ensuring that all of the key disciplines and stakeholders who impact or are impacted by the issue are a part of the team. Once membership is established, teams must clearly articulate their vision, mission, and the goals of their work together;¹ establishing the team's charter provides clear expectations about how the team will work together and will lead to a specific plan for how the team will accomplish its mission. However, even with these key structures in place, teams may falter without the support of a skilled facilitator or the necessary staff support. This document describes the role of facilitators and staff in the important work of supporting the effectiveness of collaborative teams.

The Importance of Attending to Team Process Functions

The most effective teams excel as a result of their success on two dimensions.

- *Task functions:* The most obvious is the task dimension. Teams that are clear about their vision and mission, develop specific goals and objectives that, when accomplished, will assure the achievement of the mission, and have the technical competency to carry out their work are poised to succeed in their task functions.

- *Process functions:* Unfortunately, clarity in vision and mission, work plans, and technical competencies alone are unlikely to result in a successful team-based outcome. It is the failure of group process that often results in dysfunctional teams. In many cases, dysfunctional teams either suffer from paralysis, or worse, declare failure and disband.

For this reason, it is critical that teams attend to task and process functions, both as they establish their teams and as they work together over time. Securing the assistance of a skilled facilitator to manage the team's process work will improve the likelihood that collaborative teams will be successful in achieving their goals.

The Skills and Characteristics of Effective Facilitators

Teams can take many forms, and may be established to address any number of long or short-term issues. Regardless of the composition of the team or their content focus, a skilled facilitator will almost invariably enhance the team's likelihood of success. Understanding the role of the facilitator, assuring that the individual selected to serve as the team's facilitator possesses the essential skills and characteristics to effectively carry out their role, and empowering the facilitator to manage the team's process will all be key factors in the team's success.

The Role and Responsibilities of a Facilitator

A facilitator is someone who "...contributes structure and process to interactions so groups

are able to function effectively and make high-quality decisions...a helper... whose goal is to support others as they achieve exceptional performance."²

In order to establish structure and manage process so that teams can be effective and make high-quality decisions, facilitators should assume the following responsibilities:

- *Assuring the team is appropriately composed.* For groups to be successful, they must be properly composed. One of the responsibilities of the facilitator is to guide team members through an analysis of their stakeholders and determine their composition on the basis of this analysis. This is an obvious early activity; however, facilitators should also be attentive to key points in time when membership should be re-evaluated.
- *Defining meeting goals and the products that will be produced.* Each and every meeting should be convened with a specific set of goals in mind. Likewise, each meeting should result in one or more products, whether those are decisions, an approved report, or a work plan to achieve a new set of tasks.
- *Developing meeting agendas that will direct the team's work.* The development of detailed meeting agendas that outline the work to be accomplished at each meeting is critical. Agendas should indicate the tasks to be accomplished; the fulfillment of these should result in the achievement of the meeting's goals and the production of the desired work product(s). Meeting agendas should also indicate the names of the individuals responsible for conducting each discussion, and the amount of time devoted to each topic. In advance of each meeting, facilitators should seek input from team members about those items to be addressed at the next meeting. This is ideally accomplished at the end of each meeting for the subsequent gathering. A draft agenda should be circulated in advance of each meeting to afford all members the opportunity to provide input.
- *Guiding the team's discussions during meetings.* Perhaps the most important responsibility of the facilitator is to guide the

group's discussions in such a way as to ensure that all members have a voice and are contributing to the discussions equally. This requires the ability to manage team members who may speak too frequently or not at all, to encourage team members to express their dissenting views productively, and to keep the group on task and curtail tangential discussions.

- *Summarization of key points.* Team discussions are best managed through active listening. Through this technique, facilitators summarize key points made by members. Summarizing facilitates a progressive discussion by demonstrating that members have been "heard," allowing the conversation to advance to a conclusion rather than become hopelessly circular and redundant.
- *Noting key points and decisions throughout each meeting.* Like active listening, documenting a meeting's discussions – typically through the use of a flip chart – facilitates progressive dialogues by noting on paper key points and decisions. This documentation serves as a visual reminder of the forward movement of the discussion; it also serves as a helpful tool to those who will later document the meeting in the form of a meeting record.
- *Determining the team's mode of decision making.* A key responsibility of the facilitator is to surface critical issues for discussion, particularly those that team members are unlikely to identify for themselves. One of these is the group's operating norms around decision making. Teams adopt various decision making styles; majority vote and consensus-based are two common styles. Some teams adopt multiple styles, basing the style of decision making on the particular set of circumstances. Early on in the group process, facilitators should be certain to put this topic of conversation on the team's agenda and in those instances where multiple decision making methods might be used, should ensure that members are aware of their decision making mode prior to entering into decision discussions.
- *Guiding the team through the establishment of ground rules.* Very early in the group process, members should have a discussion

about their ground rules, which should establish team members' expectations for their conduct with one another. Once developed, the ground rules should be noted and posted at each meeting. They may stipulate the expectations for "equal voices around the table," to "begin and end meetings on time," or the need to "be positive and forward thinking." Other common ground rules specify expectations about meeting attendance, the use of designees, the need to share the work load, honor confidentiality, and complete work tasks in a timely way. Facilitators should seek agreement from all team members to abide by these rules, gently remind members when they violate them, and encourage members to hold one another accountable to them.

- *Identifying methods for team members to educate one another about their individual roles and responsibilities.* Frequently, teams are composed of individuals who represent different agencies and disciplines. They bring unique skills, experiences, and perspectives to the table. While members typically appreciate the diversity of their colleague's points of view, they often do not have sufficient background knowledge to fully appreciate it. Therefore, facilitators should plan discussions that allow each member to describe their background, experience, role, and those aspects of their agency's function that are important to the group's work.
- *Surfacing the values individual members bring to the team process and finding common ground among these.* As individuals, we are much more than the skills and experiences we bring to a team. Most of us are also people with deeply held personal beliefs that influence our views of the world, including our work world. Understanding that one team member values "compassion and individuality" while another values "equity and predictability" can be important to understanding members' orientation to a particular discussion. Absent the need to make a decision on a particular matter, the values described may be of no consequence. But in the face of making a decision to implement a process to determine whether an offender should be terminated from a

program for example, these values will become critically important. The individual who values compassion and individuality may strongly advocate for an individual case review without criteria to determine the termination outcome, whereas the individual who values equity and predictability may be adamant about the need for an objective decision making tool. For this reason, teams should set aside time to air their personal values and then agree upon a set of core values they will use to guide their work together. Doing so will assure that the decisions made are based upon the group's agreed upon values rather than each individual's personal values.

- *Clarifying each individual's roles and responsibilities on the team, and clearly articulating the expectations of team members.* Most teams identify their membership based upon the skills, experience, knowledge, authority, or resources an individual can bring to the table. Too often however, we fail to share with those asked to participate on our team the role we want them to play or the expectations we have for their performance. For this reason, many team members fail to meet our expectations; this is not willful, but rather, it is typically out of ignorance, for most people seek to deliver that which they understand to be expected of them. Therefore, facilitators should guide teams through an exercise that seeks to both specifically articulate the roles and responsibilities of each team member, and to establish the expectations members hold of one another.
- *Establishing a system of communication, including setting an appropriate meeting schedule.* Ensuring that the team has a way to communicate and exchange information is also important. Regular team meetings are a common method of ongoing communication. Facilitators should help the group to decide on a regular meeting schedule and attend to the details of when and where the meetings will be held, how long the meetings will be, and who is expected to attend. Other communication norms should be discussed as well, including the expectation that meeting records will be produced and disseminated in a timely manner, and that members will

inform one another of issues that arise between meetings.

- *Assisting the team in developing a compelling vision statement.* Teams must be clear about what they want to accomplish and how they will work together. As elementary as this may sound, many teams often attempt to move forward without paying attention to what they hope the outcome of their work will be. Facilitators should ensure that the team establishes a vision statement, and that it is developed jointly by all team members and is fully representative of the interests of all those at the table.
- *Guiding the team through the development of a mission statement that defines clearly the specific outcomes the team is willing to commit itself to achieving.* Mission statements differ from vision statements. Where a vision statement defines the ultimate outcome the team is working towards (such as President John F. Kennedy's vision to "explore the stars"), a mission statement defines the specific work of a group ("to land a man on the moon by the end of the decade"). Whereas a vision statement does not define how the ultimate outcome will be achieved, a mission statement does. It defines precisely the work the group will take on and ideally provides measurable outcomes that will serve as benchmarks to gauge the team's success or failure in meeting its mission.
- *Establishing a work plan that includes specific goals and objectives designed to assure the success of the team in achieving its mission.* The identification of specific goals and objectives will serve as the team's "road map" to achieving its mission. Facilitators should both guide team members through the development of a specific work plan – complete with individual assignments and deadlines – and routinely review and update the plan to ensure that work is progressing.
- *Holding team members accountable for their work.* For a collaborative effort to succeed, each individual must commit to do their part. Once they do, the group's norm should be to hold one another accountable to these commitments. Typically however,

colleagues and work partners are reluctant to do so. Facilitators can therefore assist the group process tremendously by questioning and probing members about their progress on commitments in a neutral and non-judgmental manner.

- *Working closely with the team's leaders and staff to achieve the responsibilities listed above.* Although the facilitator's list of responsibilities is lengthy, they too are a member of a team, and therefore have another responsibility: to work collaboratively with their own team. Their collaborative partners include the team's leader and those who provide the staff support function. Facilitators should work closely with their partners to assure the effective management of the team, checking in periodically about the participation of members, the dynamics of the group, the clarity of the vision, mission, and goals, and the progress of the team in carrying out their task functions.

Listed above are some of the key ways facilitators can serve their teams. In addition to these, there may be other responsibilities appropriate for the facilitator to assume, depending on the needs of the particular group.

The Essential Skills and Characteristics of an Effective Facilitator

Serving as a facilitator requires a specific skill set; it is not a job that comes naturally to everyone. To be most effective, facilitators must be able to engage group members in the process of working together, engender trust and openness among team members, and inspire team members both to share ideas and contribute to the team's efforts. They must be diplomatic, flexible, mindful of group dynamics, and assertive when needed. Above all, their primary goal must be to help the team succeed. Notes one expert: "Facilitating should be an egoless activity. The purpose is to make the group succeed... an effective facilitator will leave a group convinced that 'We did it ourselves!'"³

Ingrid Bens identifies a number of core skills of experienced facilitators, including the ability to⁴:

- Stay neutral;
- Listen actively;
- Ask clarifying questions;

- Paraphrase;
- Manage digression;
- Offer clear summaries; and
- Give and receive feedback.

These techniques help to keep the group's discussion focused and directed, which in turn provides team members with a sense of productivity and purpose.⁵ Groups that lack a strong facilitator are often faced with meetings or team work sessions that are unfocused and unproductive. A facilitator's job is to ensure that this does not happen, that team members remain committed to the work and motivated to carry out their responsibilities to the team.⁶

The Role and Responsibilities of Staff Providing Support to the Team

Ideally, teams will also have staff designated to support their activities. The role of support staff is to carry out those activities that are essential to the team's work that do not have to be accomplished by the team leader, facilitator, or the team members themselves.

The responsibilities of support staff include:

- Arranging appropriate space for team meetings, as well as equipment, food and beverages;
- Preparing materials for team meetings;
- Drafting and sending correspondence;
- Taking meeting minutes;
- Creating accurate meeting records;
- Collecting and synthesizing data and information to support members' work;
- Providing administrative support to the team's leader, facilitator, and members; and
- Preparing reports and other documents as appropriate.

Identifying Facilitation and Staff Support

Because the facilitator should remain neutral and process rather than content focused, it is generally not advisable to ask a member of the team to fill this role. Then how is a facilitator

identified? Under the best of circumstances, resources will permit the engagement of a neutral facilitator to guide the team's work. Absent this alternative, individuals who can assume these responsibilities as a part of their routine duties might be found within a local agency or department, community service center, or university. Some teams have had success identifying volunteer facilitators who, for various reasons, are willing to provide their services at no cost.

Unlike facilitation assistance, staff support is typically found within the agencies that are represented on the team. This role might be filled by a single person or a group of individuals who themselves work collaboratively to carry out this function. In either case, clarity of role and task is as important for those providing staff support as it is for other members of the team.

Conclusion

Effective facilitators assist teams by⁷:

- Helping to establish direction for the team and defining a road map to help them reach their destination;
- Managing group discussions in such a way as to maximize the contribution of all members;
- Creating a team process that is efficient and outcome focused;
- Keeping an accurate record of team members' ideas and decisions;
- Providing assistance and feedback to group members so that they are able to assess their progress and follow their work plan; and
- Maintaining an environment that allows members to work productively and collaboratively.

Effective facilitation and staff support are integral to the success of collaborative teams. A skilled facilitator engages team members in their work, creates an environment rich in the open exchange of ideas, offers encouragement, and maximizes the productivity of the group. Because facilitators can help a team to realize a higher level of success than would have otherwise been possible, the benefits of utilizing a skilled facilitator cannot be underestimated.

A Note to Readers

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¹ For more information about how to develop collaborative teams and how teams can work together effectively, see the "How to Collaborate" section of the Collaborative Justice Web site at <http://www.collaborativejustice.org/how.htm>.

² Bens, FACILITATION AT A GLANCE! 2 (AQP/Participative Dynamics/GOAL/QPC, 1999).

³ Bens, FACILITATION AT A GLANCE! 18 (AQP/Participative Dynamics/GOAL/QPC, 1999).

⁴ Bens, FACILITATION AT A GLANCE! 6-9 (AQP/Participative Dynamics/GOAL/QPC, 1999).

⁵ Bens, FACILITATION AT A GLANCE! 6 (AQP/Participative Dynamics/GOAL/QPC, 1999).

⁶ Bens, FACILITATION AT A GLANCE! 14-15 (AQP/Participative Dynamics/GOAL/QPC, 1999).

⁷ Bens, FACILITATION AT A GLANCE! 3-4 (AQP/Participative Dynamics/GOAL/QPC, 1999).