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The Secrets of Team Facilitation

People with top-notch team-facilitation skills play an increasingly critical role in organizations. The good news? Most people can learn to facilitate well.

BY GREG BURNS

More and more businesses are turning to work teams to improve their products, processes, and services—and for good reason. When work teams work well, they are more likely to produce creative breakthroughs and practical solutions than when employees labor alone.

There are several types of teams. A cross-functional team typically assembles to achieve a specific and significant improvement and then disbands. A standing team that represents a natural work group aims for continuous improvement by pursuing a series of related goals.

Members of teams may include senior vice-presidents, managers, supervisors, hourly workers—and even suppliers and customers.

Regardless of a team's composition and purpose, most successful teams share the common denominator of high-quality facilitation.

Because effective work teams can be a valuable asset to a firm, people who can successfully facilitate team interactions play an increasingly critical role in organizations in many industries and in many countries around the world.

The ability to facilitate comprises a collection of skills. Expert facilitators do the following tasks:

- manage meetings
- help teams agree on clear goals, roles, and procedures
- ensure that all team members contribute
- discourage disruptive behaviors
- manage conflict
- guide teams' decision-making processes
- communicate clearly with all team members
- observe and accurately interpret group dynamics.

Theories of Group Development

Researchers have proposed many theories of group development. The following are three theories that offer useful insights for team facilitators.

Inclusion, control, and affection. One theory of group development maintains that teams must deal with these three major issues as they move from birth to maturity. These are not distinct phases; all three issues are always present, but different ones dominate a team's evolution at different times. Individual team members work through these issues separately, but the issues affect the team as a whole.

When a team first forms, members deal with issues of inclusion. Members want to establish themselves as participants, and they worry about being ignored or left out. Members typically wonder to themselves, "Who are these people, and why am I here with them?" "Do I even want to be here?" and "How much of myself do I have to give up or mask to be accepted as part of this group?"

At first, members may be so polite that it hurts. The team is not strong enough to support members who disagree with others; challenge the group's thinking; or disagree with goals, roles, or procedural issues. Eventually, personal anxieties may give rise to self-focused behavior such as clowning, withdrawal, or domination. During this stage, members deal with the basic developmental problem of forming a commitment to the group.

When members resolve issues of inclusion, the issue of control takes center stage. As a team attempts to agree on decision-making and problem-solving procedures, individual styles, paradigms, and techniques cause underlying conflicts. During this stage, teams may experience role conflicts, leadership struggles, goal ambiguity, and general frustration. Members typically think to themselves, "Who has the most influence in this team, and is that OK with me?" and "How much power do I have in this team?"

Eventually, issues of control recede and issues of affection dominate. The team members focus on support and alignment, asking themselves such questions as "Who do I agree with?" "Who do I want to be paired with?" and "Who has the best chance of succeeding?"

Form, storm, norm, and perform. Another team-development model identifies four stages of development: forming, storming, norming, and performing. Forming refers to the start-up period, when members tentatively explore the boundaries of acceptable group behavior.

During the storming stage, team members realize that the task is difficult and grow impatient with a lack of progress. They argue about the action the team should take, rely on their personal and professional experience, resist collaboration, and become testy and argumentative.

During the norming stage, team members reconcile competing loyalties and responsibilities. They accept the team and its ground rules, their roles, and each other. Competitive relationships become more collaborative; the team members begin to work with each other.

In the performing stage, team members discover the strengths and weaknesses of other members, understand and embrace their roles, and work in concert.

Behavioral model. This model can overlay both of the previous models. Under this model, team developmental behavior falls into three general categories: self-oriented, maintenance, and task-related behavior.

Self-oriented behavior includes clowning, self-promotion, power-seeking, dominating, and withdrawing. Members engage in self-oriented behavior to establish their credentials and identities and to attract attention. Uncertainty causes them to act this way during the forming or inclusion stages.

Teams need to practice maintenance-oriented behavior to help members get comfortable with each other. Maintenance-oriented behavior includes summarizing, clarifying, gatekeeping, encouraging others to speak and participate, seeking consensus, giving and valuing feedback, setting standards, and calling attention to how the group is working.

As teams evolve, members shift from self-oriented behavior to task-oriented behavior aimed at getting work done. Nonetheless, teams will not carry out tasks effectively at first, as issues relating to control come to the forefront—the storming stage.

Again, teams need to practice maintenance-oriented behavior to resolve their control issues. When they resolve these issues, teams move into the norming, and then the performing stages of development, during which they address and resolve their issues of affection. During these later stages, members exhibit relatively little self-oriented behavior. They continue to engage in some maintenance-oriented behavior, and task-oriented behavior moves to the forefront.

No matter what job a person holds, he or she can benefit from developing effective facilitation skills.

Most people can learn to facilitate well. Learning to facilitate is especially important for

- team leaders and other people who run team meetings
- internal project coordinators
- first-line supervisors, managers, and steering-committee members.

Content and process

To achieve their goals, teams must carry out both content tasks and group processes. Content refers to tasks such as drawing and analyzing flowcharts and using problem-solving techniques that directly address a team's goal. Group processes address the way members function as a team: Do all team members participate? How do the team members behave toward each other? How does the team make decisions and solve conflicts? Some teams refer to group processes as "maintenance behaviors."

Facilitation focuses mainly on group processes. All members of a team share responsibility for demonstrating the maintenance behaviors that keep the team on track. Teams that overlook group-process issues tend to fail or to

produce only mediocre results. Their members feel beaten and drained by the experience rather than energized, proud, and successful.

Some teams have coaches who monitor group processes but do not contribute directly to content tasks. Team leaders also need expert facilitation skills, especially when their teams lack coaches. As the figure on page 49 shows, team leaders and group-process coaches apply facilitation skills in slightly different ways.

Trained facilitators bring to a team competence in two broad areas: diagnostic skills and intervention skills. Facilitators use their diagnostic skills to understand team dynamics and to recognize problems or obstacles that hamper a team's effectiveness. Intervention skills help teams accomplish their tasks. Appropriate ways to intervene include asking questions, offering feedback, providing structure, and suggesting problem-solving and team-development tools.

Expert facilitators combine those two areas of competence with mastery of the following eight domains of knowledge:

- group development
- goals
- roles
- communication
- meeting management
- decision making
- problem solving
- conflict management.

The figure illustrates the ways expert facilitators apply their diagnostic and intervention skills within each of the eight domains.

Group development

All teams pass through developmental stages that parallel the stages of human development. Each developmental stage makes demands on a team's time and energy, although team members might not understand the source of their stress.

Effective teams resolve developmental issues as they arise, while remaining reasonably productive. Teams that do not resolve their developmental issues drag the problems with them from one stage to the next. Weighed down by psychic burdens, such teams have little energy to expend on their content-related tasks, so their productivity suffers.

ON EFFECTIVE TEAMS, MEMBERS SPEAK THEIR MINDS, GUIDED BY GROUP NORMS AND COMMON COURTESY

Few teams develop in a straightforward fashion. When teams encounter stress (for instance, if they lose or add new members, reach an impasse, or have their goals significantly altered by management), they frequently regress to previous stages.

Goals and roles

Teams must set goals that are specific, easily understood, and measurable. "To improve customer service" is a journey, not a goal. "To reduce customer-complaint calls by 50 percent" is a measurable goal that a team can grasp and pursue.

Teams generally make more progress toward goals when members assume and carry out formal roles. Most teams that rely on informal discussions and assumptions about roles and responsibilities run into problems. Most teams assign the following basic roles and responsibilities to specific people:

Leader. The leader keeps the group focused on its goal, manages the meeting process, and also serves as a member.

Member. Members are responsible for completing the team's content tasks and maintaining the team's effectiveness.

Coach. If a team includes a coach, this person observes the team's processes, helps the leader respond to process problems, gives the team feedback, and suggests ways that the team can overcome obstacles.

Other roles. In some cases, teams might negotiate the responsibilities vested in specific roles. For example, teams might assign to certain members responsibility for taking notes, writing on flipcharts, and reporting on the team's progress to an oversight group.

When team members finish negotiating, they should write down the specific responsibilities attached to each role. Then, members should formally accept their assigned roles.

Facilitators—whether they are team leaders or coaches—must take care that team members are not forced into roles that make it impossible for them to satisfy conflicting demands.

For example, management might encourage employees to participate on teams. But a supervisor might forbid a team member from addressing team tasks rather than job-related tasks. The team member alone cannot possibly reconcile the demands of upper management with those of his or her supervisor, so the team suffers. Facilitators sometimes must involve managers, supervisors, and other players to resolve role conflicts.

Communication

On effective teams, members speak their minds, guided by group norms and common courtesy. All members have a chance to contribute their knowledge, voice their opinions, and make suggestions; team meetings are not dominated by one or two members or the team leader. Members state their positions directly and succinctly, and other members listen actively and verify their understanding.

Facilitators need to understand patterns of communication to ensure that all team members participate and that teams make decisions based on shared information and understanding. Facilitators observe whether certain team members always launch discussions, or if comments by one team member always trigger comments—either supportive or negative—from another. Such patterns provide insights into coalitions and subgroups within the team.

Facilitators might advise a team to designate one member to keep a written record of team discussions. Without a written record, dominating members might not believe they talk so often and for so long. They also might insist that a quieter teammate has not opened his or her mouth, when in fact the member has spoken several times and has simply not been heard.

Matrix of Facilitation Skills

Domain	Competency		
	Diagnosis	**Intervention**	
	Leaders and Coaches diagnose by	**Leaders intervene by**	**Coaches intervene by**
Group Development	◗ understanding and appreciating team-member behavior in the context of the team's stage of development ◗ recognizing when the team is dealing with specific developmental issues and when it is avoiding them ◗ identifying when unresolved developmental issues become obstacles.	◗ recognizing and addressing behaviors related to developmental stages ◗ devoting time and activities to helping the team resolve developmental issues ◗ considering how developmental issues might affect the leader's own behavior.	◗ helping the team leader understand and manage behavior related to different stages of development ◗ asking questions that help team members focus on resolving specific developmental issues ◗ designing activities that will help a team resolve developmental issues.
Goals	◗ verifying that all team members understand and commit to a common goal or goals ◗ recognizing when a team's inability to function is caused by confusion over goals or by the fact that some or all members do not accept the goals.	◗ stating and clarifying goals and gaining the commitment of team members to common goals ◗ providing time for the team to discuss, clarify, modify, and negotiate goals.	◗ helping a team know when problems related to goals hinder effectiveness ◗ helping a team clarify its goals and pinpoint areas of confusion or dissent ◗ prompting discussion, data collection, and negotiation to clarify and foster commitment to team goals.
Roles	◗ gauging the clarity of each role and how well it is being performed ◗ recognizing when ambiguous roles pose problems for a team ◗ recognizing when a member is not ready for, or committed to, a specific role ◗ recognizing role-conflict issues.	◗ accepting and fulfilling the leader's role ◗ taking responsibility for leading meetings and keeping them on track ◗ establishing and reminding members of team norms for meeting behavior ◗ formally or informally collecting data to evaluate each meeting, and making plans for improvement.	◗ ensuring that formal roles are assigned and understood ◗ acting when a team member's failure to perform a key role hinders the team ◗ coaching the team leader and team members on how to carry out their roles ◗ helping the team to improve ◗ helping teams resolve role conflicts.
Communication	◗ observing verbal communication patterns ◗ observing nonverbal communication patterns ◗ determining whether people's perceptions are distorting information sharing and understanding among team members.	◗ establishing group norms for effective communication during meetings ◗ maintaining open, balanced, and clear communication ◗ soliciting ideas from quiet members, testing understanding, and summarizing exchanges to avoid confusion.	◗ helping a team achieve or sustain open, balanced, and clear communication ◗ giving feedback to the team on communication patterns and suggesting ways to overcome barriers to communication ◗ helping the team leader deal with communication problems.
Meeting management	◗ recognizing when poor or incomplete planning and preparation detracts from team meetings ◗ being sensitive to time management ◗ pinpointing specific types of planning and time-management activities needed to correct certain problems.	◗ using appropriate tools, such as a timed agenda and meeting minutes, to improve the quality of meetings ◗ identifying ways to improve meeting preparation, planning, and follow-through.	◗ helping a team when poor meeting planning hinders its effectiveness ◗ helping a team identify ways to prepare better for its meetings ◗ coaching team members who are responsible for meeting planning ◗ ensuring that decisions are recorded, tasks are assigned, and deadlines are set.
Decision making	◗ recognizing when a decision is made implicitly rather than explicitly ◗ identifying the type and appropriateness of the decision-making process the team members are using ◗ assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the team's decision making.	◗ selecting an appropriate decision-making method and leading a team through the process.	◗ giving feedback to a team regarding its decision-making behavior ◗ ensuring that a team selects an appropriate decision-making method ◗ helping a team explore the consequences of using an inappropriate method ◗ coaching the team leader in choosing and implementing different decision-making methods.
Problem solving	◗ recognizing when a structured problem-solving approach is sufficient and when more specialized problem-solving tools are required ◗ determining when and why a team has trouble solving problems and what the team needs to get back on track.	◗ leading a team through a structured problem-solving approach ◗ maximizing members' involvement and creativity within the context of a structured problem-solving process ◗ recognizing the need for a specific problem-solving tool and applying it, with outside help if necessary.	◗ helping a team when it fails to use an appropriate problem-solving approach or uses one poorly ◗ providing a team with just-in-time training in problem-solving techniques ◗ coaching a team in how to apply problem-solving methods ◗ suggesting problem-solving tools for specific situations ◗ arranging for experts, if appropriate, to help a team solve difficult problems or apply specialized tools.
Conflict management	◗ determining when members are suppressing their ideas to avoid conflict ◗ determining if divergent or unpopular ideas are being rejected or ignored ◗ keeping tabs on whether conflict is constructive and task-related ◗ recognizing when members try to smooth over conflict rather than confronting it, and when unresolved conflict immobilizes a team ◗ determining whether conflict is caused by issues related to goals, roles, or work procedures.	◗ soliciting ideas and suggestions from all team members ◗ drawing out and summarizing opposing positions ◗ steering conflict away from personalities and toward task-related issues ◗ tolerating and sustaining task-related conflict, even when it makes some members (including the leader) uncomfortable ◗ implementing an appropriate decision-making procedure to break a deadlock.	◗ helping the team recognize that task-related conflict encourages innovation and creativity ◗ helping the team respect and listen to opposing and minority positions ◗ helping the team identify and use an appropriate decision-making procedure for breaking deadlocks ◗ matching interventions to the team's stage of group development.

When facilitators analyze interruptions, they gain insight into a team's power dynamics. Research indicates that people feel free to interrupt people they perceive as lower than themselves in rank, status, or power. When a team comprises peers, interruptions might reveal a pecking order based on department, education, age, sex, ethnic background, or some other distinction. In time, team members who are persistently interrupted—and therefore, disempowered—may fight or withdraw instead of working cooperatively.

Skilled facilitators also pay keen attention to nonverbal communication, such as body movements and gestures. Nonverbal communication goes beyond what people say; it reveals what they feel. Feelings can help identify barriers that can stymie a team.

Suppose a team member confidently asserts that he or she can accomplish a certain task but displays body language that suggests otherwise. The facilitator needs to address not only the team member's doubts, but also the question of whether the team's norms inhibit members from admitting uncertainty or asking for help.

Facilitators examine the "filters" that affect team communication, and intervene when individual perceptions get in the way. All people send and receive information through the filter of personal perceptions.

For example, if team members perceive themselves as experts or high-ranking team members, they communicate assertively and miss messages that conflict with their beliefs. If team members perceive themselves as inexperienced or lack confidence, they communicate more tentatively and filter communications so that messages confirm their self-image.

Meeting management

Teams meet to share information, solve problems, make decisions, analyze data, implement plans, and evaluate earlier decisions. But meetings in general have acquired a bad reputation. People often complain that meetings waste their time.

Facilitators can diminish or eliminate such complaints about team meetings by helping teams manage their meetings well. Facilitators ensure that teams

take the following steps when they plan and run meetings:

- Clearly state the purpose for every meeting.
- Prepare and distribute agendas before every meeting to provide structure and keep meetings focused.
- Decide if anyone besides the team members should attend the meeting.
- Notify and then remind all participants of the time, place, and purpose of the meeting and of all the meeting participants.
- Prepare the meeting rooms with adequate seating, flipcharts and easels, paper, markers, and masking tape.
- Establish (or review) the ground rules the group will use to govern itself. Groups typically establish such rules as "Meetings will start on time no matter who is late," "No one may interrupt anyone else," and "Everyone will come to meetings prepared."
- Dispense with every agenda item by either making a decision, referring the item for study or other action, tabling the item until a future meeting, or deleting the item if team members agree.
- Use flipcharts to record key points and decisions, note tasks and deadlines assigned to team members, and outline next steps.
- Record non-agenda items on a flipchart labeled "asides" and refer to this chart when drawing up the agenda for the next meeting.
- Record meeting minutes to remind team members about discussion points, tasks to complete, and decisions to make. Include the date and time of the meeting and the names of attendees.

Decision making

Teams make a broad range of decisions. Some decisions concern the way a team functions. For example, teams decide when or where to meet and who will record and distribute meeting minutes. Teams also make decisions about their goal-related tasks, such data collection. For each decision, effective teams select an appropriate decision-making method.

In general, people make decisions in the following three ways:

Unilateral decision making. One person makes the decision. This method is appropriate for decisions that

require the expertise of a specific person. Unilateral decision making is fast, but it might not garner widespread support.

Consultative decision making. This strategy takes more time than unilateral decision making. One person makes the decision with the input of others. Teams must avoid "pseudo-consultative" decisions in which "input" is solicited after a decision has already been made.

Group decision making. Group decision making can take several forms. Traditional voting (one person, one vote) can create factions. Multi-voting, in which each member votes for his or her top choices, helps narrow a team's options without polarizing the team. Decisions made by consensus tend to be well-accepted, but teams should reserve this strategy for important decisions for which they have time. When teams reach consensus, each team member can say, "I will support this decision."

Problem solving

Problems generally fall into one of three categories: technical problems, systems problems, or people-related problems. Most problems in most organizations are either technical or systemic, but organizations tend to identify most problems as people-related.

To solve problems effectively, work teams need a structured process to identify root causes and then generate and implement the best possible solutions. Teams also need a variety of problem-solving tools to deal with specific problems.

Here is an example of a six-step problem-solving method:

- Discuss and define the problem.
- Collect and display data related to the problem and determine its root cause.
- Generate possible solutions.
- Evaluate possible solutions based on weighted criteria.
- Recommend, approve, and implement a solution.
- Measure and evaluate the results of the solution and adjust.

Conflict management

A major advantage that a team has over an individual is its diversity of resources and ideas. But diversity also produces conflicting ideas and opinions. Research indicates that effective teams tend to experience conflict related to tasks, while ineffective teams experience more personal conflict. A team's abilities to come up with new and different ideas and to reach good decisions reflect its ability to manage conflict.

The practical improvement and innovations produced by work teams can achieve dramatic improvements in customer value and can benefit their organizations' bottom line. Organizations are most likely to realize the benefits of work teams if they support their teams with high-quality facilitation.

> FACILITATION SKILLS ARE NOT INTANGIBLE; OUTSTANDING FACILITATORS ARE TRAINED, NOT BORN

Facilitation skills are neither soft nor intangible, and outstanding facilitators are trained, not born. Using the competency and domain matrix as a framework, any organization can teach practical facilitation skills to employees who lead, support, and serve on work teams. ■

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