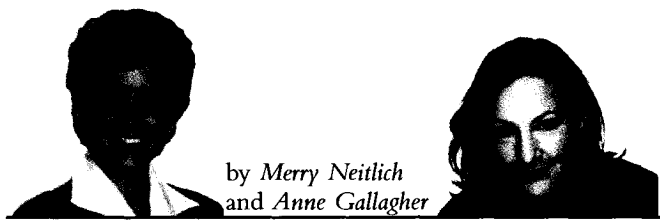


Polishing Your Facilitation Skills



by Merry Neilich
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So there we were in the most challenging facilitation of our careers.

The goal of this meeting was for the group to narrow down a field of brand options and select one. The chair, also known to her colleagues as Attila the Hun, had strong opinions about everything discussed. We used every tool we knew about dealing with difficult people. When she monopolized the conversation, we reflected back the essence of what she said and asked for other viewpoints. We redirected the floor back to the disenfranchised participants when she cut them off and told them they were wrong. We were exhausted after more than two hours of this. So were the group members. Finally, she left the room to use the facilities. The group organized a small coup and told us to vote *immediately* while the chair was gone!

She returned and was surprised, but she finally went with the flow. It was over. We all took aspirin and realized that group momentum can have very positive effects! In fact, dealing with groups and their many dynamics is at the heart of good facilitation.

When Facilitation Skills Are Needed Most

As marketing professionals, we have frequent opportunities to organize and lead various types of meetings. These might consist of a group of partners interested in a particular marketing initiative or perhaps a group of marketing professionals in your firm that needs to organize or prioritize marketing projects.

When asked to facilitate a meeting, you might need to assist with setting goals, creating an agenda, developing consensus among the participants on a particular issue or creating meaningful follow-up steps.

Facilitation Guidelines

There are some tried-and-true facilitation guidelines to help you prepare for your next facilitation. They include:

- ✓ Start on time — end on time.
- ✓ Use lots of eye contact, and nod to participants to show they are “heard” (not to show agreement with ideas).
- ✓ Use a pleasant tone of your voice. Be accepting of all ideas.

I. Force Field Analysis

- Force field analysis is useful for clarifying a problem and finding solutions for specific obstacles.
1. Ask participants to focus on the situation that concerns the group — a situation they want changed. Then describe in specific terms the attributes of the current state.
 2. Participants then imagine what the situation will be like in five years if nothing is done — the worst-case scenario.
 3. Participants then think about what the situation would be like if something were done — what would the desired state look like?
 4. The next step is to identify the forces driving change and the forces restraining change.
 5. Participants use a problem-solving process (facilitation) to remove or buffer the restraints.

You will need to clarify the problem or issue at hand before you begin.

II. Principals of Problem Solving

1. Let go of the “right/wrong” or “assigning blame” paradigm.
2. Convey respect to all participants in the problem-solving process.
3. Resolve to solve the problem together.
4. Focus on the problem first, and then look for solutions.

Handling Conflict in a Meeting

If meetings are well planned, conflict is less likely to surface. If it does, it probably needs to. The most common reaction to conflict is avoidance. Repressing conflict, pretending it doesn't exist, hoping it will go away or admonishing participants for disagreeing are all forms of avoidance. Generally, the conflict doesn't disappear, and often, the situation worsens.

The facilitator is in a good position to help participants engage in constructive conflict. Understanding the nature of conflict — its sources and patterns — helps the facilitator remain centered when participants begin to develop oppositional stances on goals or strategies in the planning process.

When it appears that addressing a specific conflict takes precedence over planning, there are a few principles to keep in mind:

1. Allocate sufficient time.
2. Help the participants clarify what the conflict is about.

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- ✓ How might you enlist their involvement in helping you achieve the goal?
- ✓ Who else needs to be involved in achieving this goal?

Meeting facilitation requires a higher-level, more refined skill set than what it takes just to “run a meeting.”

- ✓ How long will it take to achieve this goal? How will you know when your goal is accomplished?
- ✓ When do you plan to begin?

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3. Do not take sides.
4. Affirm the validity of all viewpoints.
5. Frame the conflict in terms of a problem that needs solving.
6. Create space for problem solving to occur.
7. Help participants save face.
8. Discuss what happens if no agreement is reached.
9. Ask if the group can proceed with what they do agree on and hold back on the areas of disagreement.
10. Keep in mind that ultimately, the participants have the responsibility to resolve conflict.

Dealing with Difficult People

It's imperative to listen to everyone's viewpoint — even the viewpoints of difficult or disruptive participants. It's crucial to know when to cut off or redirect negative (or downright dysfunctional) behavior. Keep the principles of “Active Listening” top of mind. That includes reflecting back the key message(s) the participant is trying to get across. It's critical for difficult people to be “heard” in order to be able to move on or listen to others.

The following phrases are often helpful when dealing with difficult people:

The most common reaction to conflict is avoidance.

- ✓ “Can you summarize your ideas or thoughts in a few key phrases so we can capture them?”
- ✓ Reflect back that you “heard” — but don't necessarily agree with — what the person said. “I think I understand how you feel about this. Let's see if we can hear a few other viewpoints as well.”
- ✓ “John, those are good thoughts. Do you have any other opinions to express before we go back to issue number two?”
- ✓ “Thank you for the feedback. Unless there are additional comments, we need to move on to our discussion of the next issue.”

Facilitation Wrap-up and Follow-up: Creating Specific and Measurable Goals

Every successful facilitation has a successful wrap-up. Participants need to leave with a strong sense of what was accomplished and what will happen next. The following questions are often used at the end of the facilitation or as follow-up:

- ✓ Who might share your interest in achieving this goal?

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- ✓ When will you complete your goal?
- ✓ What specific tasks (in chronological order) do you see as necessary to achieve this goal?

The bottom line is, meeting facilitation requires a higher-level, more refined skill set than what it takes just to “run a meeting.” With a little practice, you will find that your meetings are more productive, take less time and give all participants a greater sense of satisfaction.

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