Facilitation in management

Tony Mann examines the value of an often misunderstood, but key, generic skill

Recent years have been characterised by economic austerity around the world and have presented many challenges for organisations as well as for individuals. These tough times continue to challenge organisations' and individuals' values and emotions — and pose hard questions relating to managing change.

As people try to answer these questions and take the resulting tough decisions, two opposing philosophies compete for attention. One emphasises the leader as the person who knows best and feels it's his responsibility to tell others what should happen. This philosophy argues that, in order to avoid conflict and challenge from the people they manage, it's easier and less confrontational to 'tell' those people 'the way forward'.

The other approach is, admittedly, more difficult but more inclusive. It asks questions and seeks to engage people. With the appropriate 'leadership', teams, groups, stakeholders and even whole communities can be encouraged to be participative.

There is a strong moral and financial rationale to involve and engage people who will be affected by big decisions. This can be brought about by effective facilitation.

The need for high quality facilitation management to enable and empower organisations to operate efficiently and effectively has never been greater. Facilitation is a key, generic skill that affects all sectors of the economy and all aspects of communal life. It is a skill that people need to develop in order to be able to add real value to organisations and to the economy as a whole. Groups, presented with a facilitator who can design, adjust and apply effective process, will find this to be highly valuable.

Organisations are under constant pressure to become more competitive and/or provide greater value for money for their stakeholders. As well as the economic benefits of involving staff, there is a strong moral reason for discovering and gauging the views of the workforce/community where they have a personal stake in resolving issues. Moreover, the positive engagement of the workforce produced by effective facilitation adds value to organisations in all sectors of the economy.

People who develop this art, science and skill of facilitation could offer organisations the appropriate approach to use in tough situations. Under their guidance, meetings and workshops will achieve the desired outcomes with speed and efficiency. Management teams using a collaborative, facilitative style are discovering that, performed appropriately, it can deliver outcomes in an effective, timely and constructive way that won't compromise on key issues. Effective facilitation enables organisations to successfully tackle uncertain issues. It will help them handle emotions and challenges to people's core values.

This philosophy, and the strategy to which it gives rise, requires organisations to build an approach that embeds facilitation not just as a skill but also as a system and process of management.

One of the key ways to manage and embrace this approach to facilitation is to invest in structured and accredited facilitation. APMG has recently launched a facilitation in management scheme, the key themes of which are set out below.

Facilitation

Facilitation is a fundamental life skill for the individual and a business capability for the organisation that can be used to:
Effective facilitation can make the difference between a poor and a brilliant decision

- approaches
- models
- tools
- techniques.

They use these to help groups take appropriate decisions for different levels of:
- uncertainty
- emotional disruption
- urgency
- need for buy-in
- organisational maturity.

This gives organisations an effective participative change management toolkit. Moreover, they can use facilitation as a core role and, potentially, as a core management process. Like project management, facilitation is best when it becomes 'the way we do things round here'.

Facilitators fit into the pantheon of business world enablers as shown in Figure 2:

**Figure 2: The facilitator’s place**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High</th>
<th>Consultant (required to give the answer)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trainer (applies participative methods of learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Knowledge</td>
<td>Coach (works ‘one-to-one’ and ‘one-to-few’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator (works with many and with groups)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The effective facilitator is always:
- active, striving to keep the momentum going
- checking understanding so that people are engaged
- selecting the appropriate model or tool to take things forward.

Facilitation can support organisations, enabling people to work in a collaborative, participative way to tackle key issues and make fundamental decisions. Effective facilitation can make the difference between a poor and a brilliant decision. It can make the difference between a solution that has hidden problems and one that is robust.

**Facilitators**

A facilitator provides a method and a means to deliver answers to complex issues in an operational context without necessarily being a subject matter expert. He needs to balance time, the degree of uncertainty of the issues, and the process maturity of the organisation/group – and help the task leader to find the best possible process.

**Figure 1: Facilitators must balance three key factors**

- Time
- Degree of uncertainty of the issues
- Process maturity of the group

Facilitators know how to use the right model/tool in the right place to get the most helpful answer, allowing groups to make decisions and reach a lasting, robust agreement that has commitment and buy-in. They understand the continuum of decision-making and change and identify the best tool or technique to use depending on the significance of the decision/situation, the time factor and the need for the workforce – emotionally and mentally – to commit to the decision.

Good facilitators have a comprehensive catalogue of:

- identify issues
- resolve problems
- encourage productive interaction
- develop accurate objectives
- define the scope of change projects
- encourage and empower contributions in a safe, non-threatening environment
- engage stakeholders.

Facilitators must balance three key factors.
Models, tools and techniques
Having selected the most appropriate format, the facilitator can focus on the most appropriate models, tools and techniques to employ.

Good facilitators are not locked into their 'favourite' tool; instead, they know which one to select for any given situation. The three-dimensional framework (below) shows how the facilitator considers: the scope, the type of thinking required and the degree of uncertainty involved to pick the right model, tool or technique:

Figure 3: A framework for models, tools and techniques of facilitation

My Process Iceberg meeting model (see Figure 4 right) illustrates that the facilitator, by helping the group identify the objectives and tasks and designing the 'best' process (format and tools), can alleviate 80 per cent of the problems that beset meetings, business workshops and events. This is counter-intuitive – because we are always told that the main problems in meetings are below the 'waterline'. According to this model, the 'iceberg' rises out of the water and the remaining 20 per cent becomes much less of a problem. In fact, there are no 'difficult people'. The key issue is getting clarity of the tasks and having a good process.

Figure 4: Planning a meeting: the Process Iceberg Model

Objectives and tasks
Any objective can be divided into sub-elements, which further delineate the nature of the task:

The objective (and its sub parts) is the issue facing the group. This does not constitute process. However, task and process are fundamentally different but symbiotically connected. In addition to a group defining the task, it needs to identify how to tackle it.

Facilitators and task leaders
In any application of facilitation, there are task issues (the task leader's responsibility) and process methods (the facilitator's responsibility). The task leader and the facilitator should work together: the task leader is the person responsible for the quality of the task outcomes; the facilitator is the person responsible for designing the appropriate process.

As each objective is explored, the different tasks are identified. Each one is linked to an appropriate (facilitation) process (a combination of tools and format) to achieve the necessary output. This process is continuous until the objective is achieved.
Facilitators work with process, to help tackle the tasks. In doing so, they help the group deliver the required outcomes.

Red and green thinking
To make it absolutely clear to the group, the task and process can be differentiated by viewing things to do with task as being red thinking and those to do with process as being green thinking (see diagram above). The task leader (living in the ‘red’ arena) and facilitator (operating in the ‘green’ arena) should never merge. Merging these roles results in ‘familipulation’, where the group is manipulated via facilitation to achieve the results that the task leader/facilitator wanted rather than those it would have produced had it been free to do so.

The red arena – the task leader’s prerogative – covers the defining of the objectives, tasks and confirming the degree of uncertainty. The green arena – the facilitator’s responsibility – involves defining the process, time required and preparation. There must be clarity between the two, although they should run in parallel.

The degree of uncertainty
In defining the objectives and tasks, task leaders must take account of the degree of uncertainty involved. There can be:

• **certainty** The issue is clear and the answer can be easily obtained from the people in the group

• **complexity** The issue is relatively clear but the appropriate solution must be developed

• **uncertainty** Even the nature of the issue is unclear, so it must be defined and clarified. Only then can a solution be explored.

Process
Process – the means of production – takes raw materials (ideas) and turns them into a finished product (decisions/solutions) with the minimum of waste (effort) through the maximisation of the resources (people’s time) available.

A group goes through three stages as it works and learns about process:

• **dysfunctional** There is strong autocratic leadership and the group’s agenda is set

• **transitional** The group begins to use different formats and tools to increase its flexibility.

Interactions within the group increase and the group begins to take an active interest in the process

• **process-aware** The group recognises uncertainty and adapts the process to cope with this. Individuals take their own responsibility for the process.

The group moves from being dysfunctional to transitional initially by the leader relinquishing control to the process. The facilitator engenders in the group a willingness to try different tools and techniques. The group then begins to recognise the part that process plays in achieving an effective outcome – and how much time is needed.

The group moves from being transitional to process-aware as it uses appropriate tools to tackle the task and resolves to be willing to work in uncertainty, not avoid it.

Format
Format is the application of people to process. There are four fundamental facilitation formats:

• **all** Each person works on his own, so no one is influenced by anyone else (eg writing Post It notes)

• **group** People work in (sub) groups to tackle different tasks or to give different perspectives one issue/task

• **all to one** Everyone does the activity, directing their outputs to one place (eg a ‘wall’)

• **one to all** One person does the activity to, or on behalf of, everyone so everyone knows what needs to be known (eg a presentation).

Each of these approaches has advantages and disadvantages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>All</strong></td>
<td>Everyone gets an opportunity to input ideas/thoughts/perceptions</td>
<td>It takes more time to collate the input from everyone and ‘cluster’/analyse it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All to one</strong></td>
<td>There is an opportunity to ‘bounce’ off others’ thoughts and it takes less time to elicit the thoughts/ideas</td>
<td>The opinion of individuals can be lost and the opinion of the one or two people can hold sway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group</strong></td>
<td>The opinion of different ‘constituencies’ can be developed or cross-cutting groups can provide a mix of opinions/perceptions/views</td>
<td>The Group format still needs another format to make it effective (eg All)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>One to all</strong></td>
<td>There is the opportunity to save time and effort by getting expert input</td>
<td>If the expert isn’t well directed it can turn into a ‘solo’ self-centred presentation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Selecting the appropriate format depends on the time available and the group's level of process awareness. Each of these formats produces a different outcome and either supports the process or works against it. The rationale for using each format is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>This approach when:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- there are dominant people in the group and you want people to work independently, free of others' influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- you want everyone's own thoughts/ideas/input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All to one</td>
<td>This approach when:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- you want cross-fertilisation of ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- there is no danger of domination by individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>This it used when:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- there are different 'constituencies' in the room and you want to reflect their different perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One to all</td>
<td>This it used when:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- there is an expert in the room who can steer the group by giving his expert input (first)</td>
</tr>
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**Process tools**

Two simple tools to help a group focus on process:

- **the feedback model** People often express half-thought-through opinions, ideas and thoughts, not because they are incompetent but, rather, because the task is uncertain. Ensuring effective feedback can help the individual and the group uncover the real issues and fashion new ideas. In uncertainty, there is a need to determine the question and find the real need. This can be daunting yet it's often discovered by using the feedback model. The model has four levels and, by identifying at which level the listener has reflected back, the speaker knows how much he has been understood and can then develop his thinking or change the way he gives the information:
  - misunderstanding or misinterpreting (unintentionally) what was said
  - missing out some important points or details
  - feeding back accurately and fully what was said
  - getting behind this message's words.

- **summarise (situation/task) – propose (process) – outcome (output)** This is powerful because it:
  - connects 'red' and 'green' thinking
  - demonstrates the significance of 'green' in tackling the task
  - allows the group to take responsibility by enabling it to challenge the S, P or O and, thus, become more aware of process thinking
  - introduces models, tools and techniques in context and demonstrates their appropriate use
  - gives anyone the ability to introduce process.

The summary is the context or background and the task issues at hand. Acknowledging this, the proposal suggests a process, in the form of a model, tool or technique and format that can be used to tackle the task. The outcome or output draws this back into the realm of the task and identifies what the group will gain by adopting this way forward.

The more appropriate to the situation the process used and the more appropriate the model, tool or technique, the higher will be the quality of input and, therefore, the outcome.

**Using a systematic task/process approach**

Many management decisions go awry because of a failure to take into account all the necessary stages of situational analysis and solution finding. Facilitators can use a nine-step framework:

- **Step one – identify issues** This also means suspending judgment about causes
- **Step two – focus in on the main issue(s)/cause** Once we have found the (many) issues, we can identify the key ones
- **Step three – define the problem** Agree on the exact nature of the problem, so that everyone is working to the same agenda
- **Step four – find the main causes** Identify the possible causes and determine the main cause
- **Step five – select the criteria for an effective solution** It's important to agree the criteria before people start promoting their pet solution
- **Step six – generate ideas for potential solutions** There are potentially many solutions to a problem. Some are adaptive (rather than taking the problem away, they find a way around it), corrective (they correct aspects of the process to solve the problem) or preventative (they ensure that it can't happen again).
- **Step seven – pinpoint the most appropriate solution** Good decision-making involves choosing the best solution
- **Step eight – adverse consequences** Sometimes a solution can solve one problem and cause another
- **Step nine – action planning** Finally, it's possible to plan the implementation of the solution.

This framework reflects the Six Sigma approach. Each step needs an effective process and the facilitator should be skilled in developing or adapting the most appropriate models, tools and techniques to achieve an effective outcome.