



Share the thinking for better results... *and* gain a happier workplace!



7 facilitation practices for everyday use

Facilitation as an approach is gaining merit, interest and use in all sorts of places to increase engagement and achieve results, and quite simply to make the workplace a more open, equal and happier place to be – and who wouldn't want that? But to those unfamiliar with the principles of facilitation it may seem elusive, even impossible. Though skilled facilitation takes some learning and a lot of practice, there are fundamental practices that are available to everyone right now! The myriad of myths about facilitation and its purpose can be off-putting. Being facilitative does not mean that you have to forego your responsibilities, lower your standards or give up your rights in favour of anyone else's - in fact working in a facilitative way can increase shared responsibility, practice standards, equality and fairness in the workplace creating a highly engaging and effective environment where stuff gets done. Here are some approaches I find helpful and that you can incorporate into your everyday practice, starting now!

Start with number one - YOU:

1 Know your personal values and live by them.

Though this sounds easy it can be highly challenging, for example, when colleagues have a different value system, when others undermine (deliberately or inadvertently) your values, when your workplace or the work you do is at odds with your values system. It can be particularly challenging when someone of higher rank and power is undermining or pressuring you to operate against your own values. Take the example of a person who values honesty and fairness above all else being asked to conceal important information from customers or other staff - information that may impact on a person's decision and life. This could really compromise the person and their relationships with others and can be very disempowering. My first job when I was 15 was in a café. I was making sandwiches and dropped a piece of bread on the floor

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– buttered side down of course, just as the boss walked in. He quickly picked it up saying ‘what the eye don’t see the heart don’t grieve!’ I felt powerless to say or do anything, and I’ve never forgotten the feeling of cheating on customers - but I did manage to bin the bread when he wasn’t looking! So I was forced to go behind his back and disobey orders; he may well have felt that such behaviour was below the line, but it was because what I was being asked to do was at odds with my values. One way to ensure you live by your values is to make them known to others and to seek feedback on how your practice reflects your values. They form the foundation of your practice, relationships and decisions. And when there’s a possibility that this foundation could be shaken or threatened, it’s good practice to put that on the table for open discussion and decision-making around how it will be handled to minimise grief. And grief is a good word – when peoples’ values are not met they can be deeply saddened and hurt leading to dissatisfaction and disharmony in the workplace, disengagement and resentment. This can lead to people behaving in ways that don’t reflect their values and who are then labelled as resistant, conflictual, non-participatory, thereby creating a vicious cycle of resentment and ‘below-the-line’ behaviour. So when people are ‘behaving badly’ or simply withdrawn, resistant or complaining in the workplace you might first ask how you, or the prevailing culture, could be contributing to this and what actions you need to take to encourage a values-based culture.

2 Be sensitive to others’ values and respect them.

Being sensitive to and respecting others’ values is closely linked to the practice of living by your own values. It’s unhelpful to expect others to do things that are at odds with your, and possibly their own, value system. This can similarly lead to dissatisfaction, resentment and the vicious cycle of negative behaviour and a toxic culture. Stand up for your values and the boundaries you’ve set around these, rather than pawning valueless tasks off on others. This is especially important if you are in a management or leadership position and will send a strong message about your integrity and trustworthiness... it might cause some angst (or at worst cost you your job!) but won’t be nearly as costly as a workplace that misrepresents your and others’ values! In reality your values can be a juggling act so when there’s little choice but to do something for the greater good, don’t just cover up and pawn off, instead be open about it, let people know how you feel and work together to minimise the distress. It’s at times like these that reaffirming shared values can be highly beneficial.

3 Be authentic and honest in your dealings.

Be authentic and honest about your purpose and intent with everything you do, everything you say (and don’t say), of whether you are imposing these on others, and of the assumptions you make about others’ partiality to your ideas! Making your reasoning known can be more acceptable to people than them sensing (real or perceived) alternate motives and feeling suspicious. It’s harder to gain trust back after it’s been broken and you can lose days if not months of productivity clawing back from a position of distrust and suspicion.

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4 Manage your ego!

Let's face it, we all have an ego, otherwise we wouldn't be human. And while some egos are subtle and well controlled, others can show up being all obvious and arrogant at the most inconvenient times, or unbeknownst to its owner, and for all to see! Be careful not to confuse egotism and arrogance for confidence, enthusiasm and good leadership. Similarly, don't let passion become obsession! Allowing the ego to dictate and rule over others can be highly self-destructive as well as being destructive to the workplace culture and productivity; it can build resentment and cause disengagement. It can stop you admitting mistakes, seeking help and support when needed, learning from others or indeed allowing yourself or others to shine. And when the ego is dented it may cause you to act out or project your feelings of failure or unhappiness onto others. So an inflated or unchecked ego can make your work even harder and result in you carrying the load yourself or failing to gain the collaboration of those who could be helping you to achieve your goals!

Now you can move on to focus on others (but don't forget about YOU):

5 Ask questions and show genuine interest in the answers.

Asking questions and genuinely listening to answers can elicit knowledge, understanding, ideas and solutions and questioning has been used since the days of Socrates to encourage reflection and deep thinking. Questioning is a great technique for finding out what other's think and feel about things, their interests and skills, principles and perspectives. By asking questions and really listening to the answers, including the nonverbal responses, you may find that someone has a passion or skill to take on the very task you want to do or an aspect of it. Or they may have a piece of valuable information that you don't have (note to self: let go of the ego and the need to control everything!). Genuine curiosity is a great way to discover more, to get to know your staff, colleagues and customers, to build relationships and confidence, to show interest, respect and value. If someone feels they have a voice, are listened to and that their opinion is valued, it can go a long way towards gaining their support and engaging them. Alternatively, when you shut someone down or show them the hand it might be simply your way of saying "sorry, we have no choice but to do this and there's no time for discussion" but to the receiver it can say "I don't value what you have to say (or you!) and I don't want to hear you speak now (or ever!) and my job is more important than yours so stop wasting my time and let me get on with it (and there will be consequences)!" Probably not what you intended at all but that one tactless action, or reaction, sent a strong message that will be very difficult to erase. Note there's a link to the previous 2 points: manage your ego and be authentic about your intent.

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6 Create time and space for creativity.

Create time and space for people to reflect, have dialogue, be innovative – it doesn't have to be a large space or a long time; 15 minute reflective spaces are becoming popular as a means to gaining more input, creating high levels of awareness and reaching better-informed, more creative and collaborative decisions. Just designate a space where 'busyness' is not allowed and communication is of the curious, reflective kind. Place some flipchart paper or a whiteboard and pens, inspirational cards, creative materials and lashings of freedom to think, to be and to share. Invite and encourage people to visit it regularly, maybe even set designated times (though predicting moments of inspiration and creativity can be difficult), and see what happens. Make sure ideas are captured, shared and acted on. At your next meeting introduce some creative space and activities to engage people and promote reflection, discussion and action. Or even better, hold the meeting in a creative place – out in the garden, in the local art gallery or museum, in a room where there are windows and pictures or photos. Placing creative materials on the table can help people engage and think, especially if they are doodlers or fidgety. And all of this can be done within your agreed ways of working, terms of reference and/or the organisation's corporate values.

7 Make feedback a part of everyday practice.

Make feedback a thing of the present, part of everyday practice, not just when someone does something wrong or there's a need for performance management! Seeking feedback about yourself and your practice is a powerful way to increase your self-awareness and emotional intelligence, demonstrating your authenticity about what's important, developing your strengths and gaining genuine input from those around you. Hence you are better equipped to self-regulate and to strengthen those areas that need development. Giving feedback to others on a regular basis similarly increases their skills and knowledge, their self-awareness and ability to self-regulate, as well as their sense of wellbeing and feeling valued by their colleagues and managers. Be mindful about practices 1 to 5 above as you give and seek feedback; this can make the experience of feedback a positive, developmental and satisfying one for all involved.

On reflection, these 7 practices could have been reduced to one sentence – *'practice from a place of shared values using genuine, open 2-way communication, and it begins with you!'* Yes, it begins with **YOU** – firstly looking inward. Looking inward for your values, clarification of purpose and understanding of intent, before looking outward to others for the answers.

So get started now. While this might not make you a master facilitator it will certainly win you some recognition and accolade as an inspiring facilitative leader whose team's have a go and a can do attitude, and who gets things done.

For more information and support with facilitation, whole person learning, workplace engagement strategies and mentorship, or just to share a thought, contact

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