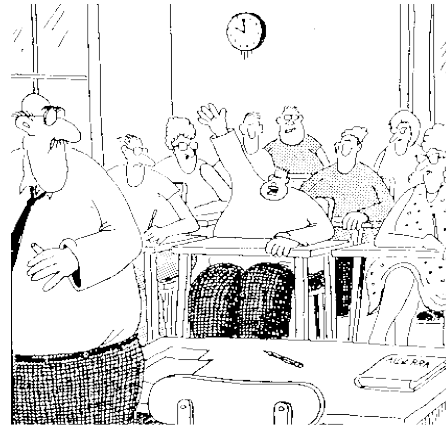




You're a Facilitator – what's that?

**You could be mistaken for a change agent, educator,
teacher, trainer, coach!**



"Mr. Osborne, may I be excused? My brain is full."

So what makes you stand out as a facilitator, and apart from those using other modes? What do facilitators do that's different? And how do you know if you're facilitating or doing something else?

I remember being at a social gathering with some of my facilitator colleagues and we got into a discussion with some other guests about our work. Our answer that we are facilitators was met with quizzical looks and confused remarks about what that meant. So we aren't teachers or educators, but we're interested in learning as an outcome; nor are we managers, but we're interested in responsibilities and accountability; and we aren't coaches but we use enabling and coaching skills. We set about explaining and describing some examples of the work we do. This led to more questions until one person said "ah I know what you do: you're train the trainers!" Finally someone piped up that they'd experienced a situation where a team was stuck on a problem and emotions were high so a facilitator came in to help them 'unstuck'. Now that sounds more like it.

In reality there are many overlaps and similarities in all of the approaches listed above.

- They all aim to bring about some kind of change or transformation in an individual or group, eg learning, development, transition, a task, a practice, a decision, a creation.
- Most use some kind of enabling skills or tactics to help others.
- They usually involve one person taking on the role of facilitator, trainer, coach etc. with an individual or group, and usually at someone's request.
- All involve content and processes, and this is where most of their differences lie.
- All may use facilitative skills and approaches during an event, some only intermittently.

A challenging scenario for a facilitator is being asked to facilitate when in fact there's an expectation that they teach, train or direct, any of which are at odds with the intent of facilitation. It helps to gain clarity about the role, what facilitators do and achieve, and how the role relates to organisational and team outcomes.

Guiding individuals, teams and organisations to reach their outcomes and be effective



You might consider using a facilitator when:

- All group members need to participate and contribute to an outcome
- Group interaction is sought and valued
- The wisdom within the group will help inform a decision or action or to create
- Internal staff, who have skin in the game, don't want to influence the decision
- There is no predetermined outcome or the outcome is unknown
- There's an intent that ownership of decisions and actions rests with group members

When we facilitate there are certain things we do and a definite list of things we don't do. As mentioned above, both content and process are present. However, the facilitator is not a content expert, they are a process expert. Though they may have an interest in the content they recognise the expertise within the group and use various processes to elicit and use the existing knowledge to guide the group towards consensus decision-making and to formulate actions.

A teaching, training or educative situation will most likely see the teacher at the top of the classroom doing most of the work, presenting, imparting knowledge and information, instructing and directing. I was given a great piece of advice as a new facilitator – if you find yourself working frantically at the whiteboard while participants are sitting back comfortably, passively, looking like pupils, it's probably a case of you rather than the group doing the work. A facilitator is there to help the group do the work, not do the work for them! That doesn't mean you are not working just as hard, observing, managing group dynamics, challenging, keeping track of time and focus, and planning ahead. The other piece of advice was to be curious, to discover. Trainers tend to follow an agenda; a facilitator needs to be flexible and prepared to digress to meet the needs of the group.

Whilst the manager, say a project or line manager, is interested in achieving a specific outcome and defines the outcome from the outset, the facilitator is neutral about the outcome. The only interest they usually have is that the group has ownership of whatever outcome is achieved and can, therefore live with the outcome. The facilitator's interest is in using appropriate and effective processes to help the group to reach that outcome. The facilitator's outcomes are not necessarily the same as the group's outcomes, though he or she may identify the fact that the group achieve an outcome as an outcome for them too, and gain some satisfaction from guiding the group to achieve the best outcome. However, if the group encounters some difficulties or dynamics that create a barrier to reaching the outcome, the facilitator's role, rather than drive and push on to achieve the outcome, is to provide a balance of support and challenge so the group can work through the issue and then move on. This can create tension with managers and administrators who may themselves be measured against the team's outcomes. But every facilitator knows that pushing through is rarely helpful in overcoming resistance, engaging people and achieving sustainable outcomes. The outcomes you want to see as a facilitator are increased engagement, participation, teamwork, consensus, informed decision-making and ownership of the end result. Any manager will be pleased to know that they will have to do less pushing for a change to stick!

Here's a link to an insightful TED talk on facilitation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chXsLtHqfdM>

For information and support with whole person facilitation, adult learning, workplace engagement and mentorship, or to arrange a free strategy meeting, contact pauline@7sensesconsulting.com.au

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