The facilitator is a group’s instrument for expressing and understanding relevant ideas and information.

Facilitating a meeting is hard work. It requires a clear sense of purpose, a juggler’s gift of attending to everything at once, and a teacher’s skill at supporting others in producing results. Exquisite facilitation is delicate, sensitive to individuals, the group, the goals, and the context in which the group works (Schwarz, 1994, p. 56).

In our work, a facilitator is 1) one who manages processes for a group so it can plan, problem-solve, share information, evaluate, and make decisions efficiently and effectively; and 2) one who improves group members’ ability to work together effectively and helps groups improve their processes.

Because facilitators don’t direct meeting content, some mistakenly believe the role is a passive one. Nothing could be further from the truth. The facilitator is the group’s instrument for expressing and understanding relevant ideas and information. The facilitator supports the group in using diverse group resources, sound decision making, and effective problem solving.

A skilled facilitator knows the work belongs to the group, not the facilitator, and chooses words that distinguish the facilitator from group members. When one simultaneously serves as a facilitator and a working member of a group, this perspective calls for special resolve to remain neutral about content.

THE LANGUAGE OF FACILITATION

Learning to facilitate adult groups is often complicated by limited opportunities to practice. One approach to learning is to isolate, analyze, and practice skill subsets.

Look at the list at right and write down phrases you typically use for each category. Then compare your list with the examples here for self-study. The examples are not “best” phrases and are certainly not the only ones that accomplish facilitation. They don’t account for facilitator styles and context, but serve as a starting place for review.

FOCUSING

Be organized, be brief, and be specific. Use words and phrases that have one meaning. Tell the group what it is to do, why or how the purpose relates to the bigger context of their work, and the specific outcome to be achieved at each stage.

Review this language facilitators might use to:

1. Get attention.
   • Stop. Look this direction.
   • Please push the pause button.
   • Can everyone hear what John is saying?

2. Clarify purpose.
   • Today’s task is to ___ (approve, generate, select, identify, explore, resolve).
   • There are three issues: What happened in the past, what you can do now, and what you can do in the future. Today’s focus is what you can do now.
   • Today’s intention is to build a foundation for the rest of your task. During this session, you will identify what you want to know on a staff survey and decide how you will use the data. We will not address writing survey questions today.

   • This morning you analyzed data. Now the task is to look for causal factors. Here is the first step ...
   • As teams, identify some ideas you would like to explore. Prepare to share your two most important ideas.
   • The intention is to provide a forum to safely express your concerns. So, work with a neighbor and identify your most urgent concerns about the project.
   • This is a three-step process. First you will _______, then you will ______, and finally _______.

ENGAGING

In the following phrases, the language moves from prescriptive statements toward more interpretative comments. Important principles are using descriptive rather than evaluative words; assuming that individuals have valuable contributions and that if they feel psychologically safe they will share; giving
people choices to empower them; using proper nouns rather than pronouns; providing scaffolds for people to examine issues from outside perspectives; and allowing for small group conversations to provide psychological safety.

Some things a facilitator might say to:

4. **Enlist participation.**
   - Here are some suggestions for how to get the most value out of today's meeting. One, please be responsible for your comfort and learning. Don't wait for a break to make yourself comfortable. Be responsible as well for your learning. If you can't hear someone, say, "Louder please"; if someone is speaking too abstractly and you need a concrete example, please ask for it.
   - If you disagree with an idea, let the group know. Use the phrase, "I see it a different way."
   - A lot of people want to comment. Let's line them up. Doris, you're first, Juanita will be second, Sam will follow Juanita. ... Remember your numbers. OK, Doris, start us off.
   - What are your concerns regarding this topic? Take a moment and tell your neighbor.
   - Can we hear from someone who hasn't spoken?

5. **Enlarge perspectives.**
   - What patterns, categories, or themes do you see in this data?
   - You have identified a number of things you will see when students are successful. What might you hear?
   - What inferences, explanations, or conclusions might you draw?
   - To begin this conversation, let's brainstorm questions (or assumptions) about this initiative.

6. **Invite group awareness.**
   - What's going on right now?
   - What does the group want to do?
   - The group seems to be stuck. Talk to your table group. Is there something important that's not being talked about?
   - You began this session talking about assessment. The last few comments have been about schedules. On which do you want to focus?
   - People seem tired. Do you want to take a break or do you want to push on for 15 minutes?
   - How is the group doing on its norm of listening to one another? Tell your partner.

**CONNECTING**

Terms like "some of," "hunches," "might," and "maybe" invite thinking while conveying that such thought is only exploratory. The language of connection becomes, at times, more artfully vague than the language of focus or engagement.

Some things a facilitator might say to:

7. **Foster understanding.**
   - Sid, could you paraphrase what Sally said? Sally, did he get it right? (If not ...) Sally, say it again.
   - Can you say specifically what you mean by the term "accelerate"?
   - It seems Antonio is advocating for doing this now, and Alice is recommending more time. Who can give us reasons supporting each position?
   - Ellen, I think Eduardo is saying he wants to increase requirements for all students, not just the middle students. Is that right, Eduardo? Eduardo, do you understand what Ellen is saying?
   - I think the group is clear about what you want to do, Aldo. What they are asking for is why. Can you help the group understand the reasons?

8. **Promote agreements.**
   - Are you ready for a decision?
   - What values will drive your decision-making processes?
   - OK, what are the different ideas you've heard? What solution might accommodate all of them?
   - It seems two positions are being expressed here. Would two people representing each be willing to form a subgroup and bring a recommendation back to the whole group?
   - I think I'm hearing agreement on that point. Can we do a quick thumbs check? Thumbs up, you agree. Down, you disagree. Sideways, you're not sure or don't care. (After seeing thumbs and one or two opposing the majority view: OK, help us understand your concerns with the proposition. What would need to be different for you to feel OK about it? Or: Is this a matter of preference or principle? Or: Are you willing to give it a try until the next reporting period?)
   - Write your understandings of the group's decision. ... Test it with a neighbor and edit if necessary. (Now hear some and help the group edit for accuracy.)

**ENLARGING YOUR PERSONAL REPERTOIRE**

Pay attention to others' facilitation styles and language. Jot down phrases they use. Isolate language from one or two of the purposes above to practice. Jot down in advance phrases you would like to incorporate into your next facilitation. Practice facilitation phrases when working with students. Keep in mind that knowing is different from understanding. To understand, groups must explain, apply, or interpret information. Have these types of thinking be a focus for your facilitation outcomes.

**REFERENCES**