

FOUR MENTAL APTITUDES HELP FACILITATORS FACING CHALLENGES

Facilitation is planned improvisation. Within learning communities, groups examine student work, talk about data, plan, look for solutions to problems, and reflect upon their own learning. Facilitators guide with planned agendas and selected protocols. Yet the unexpected can and frequently does happen. Facilitation, like teaching, is cognitively complex and has the added tensions associated with performing leadership tasks in front of colleagues.

Relationships, emotions, perceptions, and decisions inform facilitator behaviors. Because of this, facilitators must recognize the importance of the mental agility required in facilitation work. This column explores four mental aptitudes or capabilities critical to effective facilitation. They are the metacognitive processes that answer the question, “How will I use the skills and knowledge that I have?”

1. Know your intentions and choose congruent behaviors.
2. Set aside unproductive patterns of listening and responding.
3. Know when to intervene and when to go with the flow.
4. Support the group’s purposes, topics, processes, and development.

KNOW YOUR INTENTIONS

Intention separates reactive behaviors from proactive ones. Facilitators work to sustain the spirit of inquiry and protect groups from selecting the easiest — but not necessarily the best — solutions. This intention directs the facilitator’s attention to a group’s distress signals, such as frustration with process, or a diminishing number of inquiry questions, and drives an internal search for things to say or strategies to employ to sustain the inquiry stage of work.

Knowing one’s intention is the source of impulse control, patience, strategic listening, and strategic speaking. Clarity about intentions precedes and influences the three other capabilities.

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You can increase this skill by rehearsing in calm situations. When you prepare for a conversation with a parent, ask yourself, what is my intention? You step into a classroom to observe — what is your intention? You attend a social event — what is your intention? Exercising this mental ability when the heat is low makes it accessible when temperatures rise.

SET ASIDE UNPRODUCTIVE LISTENING

Facilitators listen unproductively when they: (1) think of solutions while listening to a participant speak; (2) pry for details about what is unimportant to the theme of the conversation; and (3) mentally dwell on a personal experience related to what a group describes.

All these traits are normal, and in some settings, useful. But during facilitation, they interfere with several principles: A group is its own group, not the facilitator’s; a facilitator is neutral to content; and facilitators model desirable communication behaviors to groups. To set such listening behaviors aside also means letting go of judgment about them. The facilitator simply notices these internal processes, and lets them go. The box at left displays three major set-asides.

Listening set-asides

- Solution listening;
- Inquisitive listening and responding; and
- Autobiographical listening and responding.

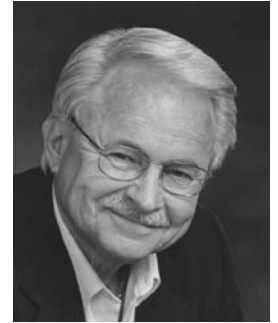
Solution listening

Listening for solutions is normal, yet not always productive. Humans are pattern-seeking and meaning-making creatures. The press of time in schools accelerates this tendency, which leads educators to be eager for action and resist reflection. Solution listening violates facilitator neutrality, the core principle in facilitation. As a result, a facilitator loses credibility and trust with the group.

Solution listening also has a toxic byproduct: The listener cannot deeply understand the communications of others if he or she is internally formulating a solution and rehearsing a “best way” of saying it.

Inquisitive listening

Autobiographical listening sometimes triggers the inquisitive frame. Facilitators might inquire to see how others’ stories compare to their own experiences. Curiosity also motivates inquisitive listening, responding, and inquiring. (See chart on p. 66.)



In each issue of *JSD*, Robert J. Garmston writes about how to create collaborative work environments that result in improved student learning. His columns can be found at www.nsd.org.

Speakers often generalize, delete, and distort information as an adaptive response to an overabundance of detail. A facilitator may employ facilitative listening, as opposed to inquisitive listening, by seeking additional information to help the group understand a speaker's true meaning.

Autobiographical listening

Autobiographical or “me, too” listening occurs when our thoughts turn inward to personal experiences triggered by a speaker's comment. Personal references can be useful in understanding the context of communications, but lingering on the personal renders a facilitator less effective. Setting aside this type of listening requires first noticing the internal process, and then sending the thought to *call waiting*.

Facilitators recognize autobiographical listening in groups. This behavior is a major source of wasted time and leads to endless storytelling in which everyone tells a version of the tale or shares a related anecdote. This is social talk, not work talk.

When a group engages in this form of listening and speaking, a facilitator can ask, “Please help the group understand how this relates to the topic.” Another approach is to listen and paraphrase “up” to a higher conceptual level. During a serial storytelling session about student hitting and name-calling, a facilitator paraphrased with, “So your children are not showing respect for each other.” Talk immediately shifted to the topic of respect, about which teachers can work more productively than focusing on individual behaviors (Garmston & Wellman, 1999).

KNOW WHEN TO INTERVENE

Facilitators need to intervene when they see that something is happening — or might happen — that could interfere with the group's effectiveness or development. Knowing when to intervene marks the difference between intrusive and invisible facilitation. This requires not only sensory acuity but also clarity about intentions and possible choices congruent with those intentions.

For example, side talk is common in meetings. When should the facilitator intervene? The facilitator considers a variety of factors. Does it seem to be work talk — bodies leaning into one another, eyes on colleagues or on papers between them — or social talk — bodies leaning away from the center, heads bobbing. Is it bothering others? Is it important enough to intervene? Can an intervention be quick or will it take time (Schwarz, 2002)?

Deciding what to do calls upon the following reper-

toire of facilitator skills: careful assessment, clear intentions, and a scan of the situation. In many ways, an experienced facilitator is like a chess master who sees several moves ahead and can quickly select moves to meet her intentions. This capacity builds with experience as the facilitator's repertoire of skills expands and evolves to the level of unconscious competence.

KNOW AND SUPPORT THE GROUP

Facilitators pay attention to three themes: getting work done, developing groups, and helping participants become skillful group members. Facilitators communicate these goals to groups so that members become partners in these

Listening examples

Participant statement	Inquisitive listening	Facilitative listening
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We used an ineffective survey. The principal gave us no choice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who developed the survey? Where did this take place? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What did you hope to learn from the survey? So you felt as if you had no input or influence.

aims. In the course of getting work done, facilitators transparently seize opportunities to develop the other two themes. They routinely provide time for reflection. They inform participants that they, too, are responsible for knowing and supporting meeting purposes, processes and goals and have a commitment to developing themselves as a self-directed group.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

The best facilitators are continuous learners. They reflect after meetings. What were the meeting goals? To what extent were they achieved? What choices did I make that significantly influenced meeting outcomes? Given the luxury of hindsight, what might I have done differently?

Mental rehearsal, a frequently cited practice in the world of sports, helps facilitators learn from experience. When facilitators replay meetings internally and test alternative choices, they activate the same neural pathways as actual practice. You can practice, effectively, inside your head.

REFERENCES

Garmston, R. & Wellman, B. (1999). *The adaptive school: A sourcebook for developing collaborative groups.* Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

Schwarz, R. (2002). *The skilled facilitator, new and revised: A comprehensive resource for consultants, facilitators, managers, trainers, and coaches.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.