

9 Characteristics of a Good Facilitator

1) An unbiased perspective: There is nothing worse than a biased facilitator who drives the discussion to a preplanned (and obvious to all) conclusion. This can be a tricky point if a manager tries to facilitate a meeting about any issue where the participants will feel uncomfortable, or perhaps even threatened, if they voice an opinion different from the group leader. If the issue being discussed is sensitive, complex, or heated, having an unbiased facilitator lead the discussion may be the only way to avoid the meeting becoming a complete waste of time. The best meetings are the ones where participants feel comfortable in knowing that their opinions are welcomed and encouraged. An unbiased leader creates a neutral zone where alternative points of view can be shared and debated in a respectful manner. This is key to driving a constructive, productive discussion.

2) Sensitivity to the feelings of individuals: Creating and maintaining an atmosphere of trust and respect requires an awareness of how people are responding to both the topics under discussion and the opinions and reactions of others. Most people will not articulate their discomfort, hurt feelings, or even anger; instead they silently withdraw from the discussion and often from the group. Sensing how people are feeling and understanding how to respond to a particular situation is a critical skill of facilitation.

3) Sensitivity to the feelings of the group: In any group, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and group “chemistry” generally reflects shared feelings: eagerness, restlessness, anger, boredom, enthusiasm, suspiciousness, or even silliness. Perceiving and responding to the group’s dynamic is essential to skillful facilitation.

4) Ability to listen: One way the facilitator learns to sense the feelings of individuals is by acute listening, both to the explicit meaning of words and also to their tone and implicit meaning. A good facilitator practices “active listening” whereby he or she may repeat, sum up, or respond directly to what a speaker said to ensure the speaker’s meaning was correctly understood by the group. This is very important especially if the speaker was unclear or the group becomes defensive.

5) Tact: Sometimes the facilitator must take uncomfortable actions or say awkward things for the good of the group. The ability to do so carefully and diplomatically is critical. Examples of this include: a group discussion dominated by one person; or a group of silent participants. The facilitator, using gentle tact, will find a way to engage the team so everyone can participate and get the most out of the session. Often times a participant may ask a question, then ramble on to eventually answer his own question. A capable facilitator knows how to diffuse these awkward moments and maintain a productive atmosphere.

6) Commitment to collaboration: Collaborative learning can occasionally seem frustrating and inefficient, and at such times every facilitator feels tempted to take on the familiar role of the traditional teacher and to lead, rather than facilitate. However, a genuine conviction about the empowering value of cooperative learning will help the facilitator resist a dominating role. Likewise a good facilitator is willing to share facilitation with others in the group. The goal is always on conducting the best, most effective discussion. To that end, a good facilitator knows how to temper his or her role accordingly.

7) A sense of timing: The facilitator needs to develop a “sixth sense” for time: when to bring a discussion to a close, when to change the topic, when to cut off someone who has talked too long, when to let the discussion run over the allotted time, and when to let the silence continue a little longer.

8) Resourcefulness and creativity: Each group is as different as the people involved. Despite a well-planned agenda, sometimes the discussions do not unfold as expected. To that end, a good facilitator is able to think on his or her feet. This may mean changing direction in mid-stream, using other creative approaches to engage the group, or entertaining ideas from the group on how to shift the agenda. Good facilitators always have tricks up their sleeves that will help a group move forward while still keeping an eye on the overall objective of the meeting.

9) A sense of humor: As in most human endeavors, even the most serious, a facilitator’s appreciation of life’s ironies, ability to laugh at themselves, and to share the laughter of others enhances the experience for everyone.

