

IMPROVING YOUR ROLE AS A FACILITATOR TO MORE EFFECTIVELY INVOLVE AND ENGAGE

By Dr. Kathy Hart

How many times have you stood in front of a group of people wondering how you were going to catalyze them to action and co-create lasting change in the organization? Regardless of whether the group is a task force brought together for a short time or a governing safety team meeting for a longer time frame, the role and responsibilities you assume as the facilitator for this gathering is directly relational to their overall success. Success, as defined by the author, is not simply completing the objectives established for the group, but it is the active involvement and engagement of the people participating within the group. Let's face it, if people believe they are listened to as part of the group, add value to the process, and see the experience as fun and enjoyable, they will tell others. The proverbial grapevine will carry the "word" that participating on future teams related to safety efforts is exciting and worthwhile. On the other hand, if people feel de-valued, not heard, and not involved, they will also tell others. According to the latest marketing theories, people will tell two people when they like something and at least seven to nine people if



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they don't. Put simply, knowing the role and responsibilities of a good facilitator, as well as putting them into practice, can improve people's participation in the company's overall safety and health activities.

ROLE OF A FACILITATOR

The main task of every facilitator is to improve both the group's process and structure, thus increasing both the individual participation by group members and the overall group effectiveness. Process, within this context, applies to how the group functions. It relates to

how people get along together, communicate with each other, solve problems, identify solutions, and handle conflict. Structure refers to the established and recurring processes within the group, such as determining how far in advance an agenda will be provided and setting ground rules, along with group roles, such as identifying who is going to document the minutes. While there is mixed research as to the direct correlation between the extent to which process versus structure affect the group, there is unified agreement that when the facilitator focuses their efforts on improving both the structure and process together then the overall performance of the group is substantially increased.

In contrast to process and structure, there is the content or subject that the group is assigned to work on.

More often than not the safety professional is often assigned to lead a team based on their knowledge of the content. When this happens, the person now facilitating is torn between managing the content of the discussion and outcomes, as well as the process and structure. Most of the studies and research conducted on effective group dynamics reveal that the facilitator should be substantially neutral to leverage the group's commitment and responsibility towards solving its problems. Unfortunately company budgets and reduced staff dictate all too often that the content expert serve in the role of facilitator. While this requires more skill in balancing the tri-fold facilitator role of content expert, along with improving both process and structure, tremendous results can still be achieved. Mastery of these skills lies in being able to grant equal value and focus to all three, balancing each against the others. For example, the facilitator needs to recognize when to back-off with respect

to content to support the group process, or invoke structural needs to strengthen the process, or when to be intentional and transparent about content. The facilitator responsibilities outlined below focus solely on improving the group process and structure, and do not incorporate the content role.

BUILDING RAPPORT

Establishing yourself in the role of a facilitator means setting clear expectations with the group as to what they can expect you to do and not do. This includes introducing yourself, your role, and your philosophy around the importance of the group process and specifically what you will do to contribute towards their being successful. Invite the group to hold you accountable to your role, just as you will be holding them accountable to their responsibilities to the group process. Ensure that others involved have the chance to articulate what value they bring to the group. Realize that part of building rapport requires you to demonstrate and model unconditional respect for the group members, empathy of where each person is coming from, and genuineness towards full participation and expressing diverse views. Remind yourself that building rapport does not just happen on Day One of the group meeting, but is practiced and applied during each and every group meeting. The words may change, but the actions and meaning must be consistent and on-going.

CLARIFY GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Determine upfront the purpose of the group, what is to be accomplished, and the expected outcomes once the goals are realized. Ensure everyone is in agreement with and can support the purpose and outcomes. A good question to pose for the group is “What does success look like when we are finished?” Being clear on the group’s goals and objectives will help to deter “scope creep”, taking on additional responsibility that are outside the boundaries of the group’s work, as well as moving the group forward when mired in too many possible solutions.

EXPLAIN THE FACILITATION PROCESS

Describe what the decision-making process is for the group, and the underlying values associated with that process. When working with groups, the most typical decision-making process is participatory decision-making. The values of participatory decision-making are full participation, mutual understanding, inclusive solutions, and shared understanding. Iterate that your role is to foster these values, and how you will assist in making this happen. This is a good time to let the group know what you will do if the group gets stalled or frustrated. For example, you may have them meet as a large group at the beginning, but then may later break them into smaller groups to help clarify views and differing perspectives. Help the group to understand how they can contribute to the overall group success by providing their ideas and insights. Let them know how you will use facilitative listening skills to assist people in articulating their personal views.

EMPHASIZE THAT THE GROUP PROCESS IS RESULTS ORIENTED

Clarify for the group that the process is to focus on results and solutions, not to criticize or self-promote. Let everyone know that your role is keep them on track with what the group is to accomplish, and to that end you will continually be reminding them what is their purpose for meeting. Build on small incremental successes, ensuring that everyone realizes how their individual contribution supports the group’s movement forward. Ensure that each person’s perspective is not only offered, but shown how it relates to the topic at hand. If the information shared is not relevant, then assist in bringing the person back to the topic at hand in a supportive and respectful manner.

ESTABLISH GROUND RULES

Ground rules serve to establish group norms and conduct during the meeting. They set the expectations for how people will hold each other accountable to minimizing distractions, enabling members to be fully present, and ensuring full participation. Some standard ground rules include putting pagers and cell phones on vibrate, starting meetings on time, not talking over other people, and no side-bar conversations. Ensure that words used in ground rules have common meaning for the group. For example, if a ground rule is to be respectful, clarify what being respectful looks like or at the very least the group will know when someone is not being respectful. Maybe what they really mean is no eye rolling or making faces when presented with an idea that is different from their own. While ground rules should be

established early-on in the group formation, they should be reviewed, updated, and improved upon throughout the group process. It is important that members of the group hold each other responsible to these pre-determined norms. Part of establishing ground rules is to ask what actions are appropriate to take when members of the group, including the facilitator, is not adhering to them.

MANAGE MEANING SYSTEMS

Meaning systems are the constructs that enable people to understand and relate to the world around them. Each person within the group will have their own individual meaning system, as viewed from their role within the organization, experiences, and personal history. As the facilitator you need to use such skills as empathizing, reflecting, and summarizing to assist the person in sharing their meaning systems in a way that is understood by others. Link the person's individual meaning system to the overarching group's meaning system, enabling a construct for shared meanings to evolve. Use facilitative listening skills (i.e. paraphrasing, drawing people out, encouraging) to help illicit each individual's contribution, enabling the group to see how the input fits into the overall group decision being created. Focus on both the similarities as well as the differences, since both are important in the group decision process. Take the opportunity to synthesize the information being shared into meaningful segments that can build upon each other.

MANAGE GROUP DYNAMICS

Observe how individuals are relating to each other, as well as how the group is relating as a whole. Who are the dominating personalities? The goal is not to diminish these individuals, but rather to build the group up so they can equally contribute their views and be listened to. Identify when conflict arises, which is almost inevitable, what are the causes, and help the group to address the conflict in a way that builds trust and confidence. Recognize patterns of human interaction and, where appropriate, bring it to the group's attention. Be attuned for emotional under currents and know when to intervene to enable the group to remain constructive and positive.

TEACH GROUP DYNAMIC SKILLS

Provide instruction to members on how to apply facilitative listening skills so they can ensure they are trying to understand others within the group. Time spent building the practice of certain skills into the group work will help everyone to function more effectively. Some additional skills to consider may include: how to dialogue, revealing empathy, coaching, and ways to question (i.e. clarifying versus probing, open-ended versus close-ended). Introduce, when appropriate, models and tools that can assist the group in better understanding each other, as well as enabling members to more fully participate in discussions.

PROVIDE FEEDBACK

Build in time at the end of each group meeting to provide feedback, identifying success factors, areas for improvement, and self-reflection. This feedback enables the group to be self-correcting and focus on continual self-improvement. Be open to receiving feedback from others in your role as the facilitator. Determine, prior to receiving the feedback, how you will externally respond to both good and needs improvement comments in a way that models and respects input from others. Ways to obtain feedback can be presented in the form of plus/delta comments or success/challenges, with each person contributing their insights.

IDENTIFY AND CELEBRATE PROGRESS

As part of setting goals and objectives (see above), identify key milestones for success along the group journey. Have the group determine what actions would give meaning and ceremony to achieving these milestones. Take the time to recognize the achieving of these successes in a meaningful way. As an example, one group agreed that when a milestone was achieved the use of the “high five” symbol would be enacted by all team members in a parade-like fashion. After each “high five” was offered, the two people would verbally thank a member of the team for their contribution in achieving the milestone.

DEBRIEF

Allow the opportunity to reflect on the group process as a whole, as well as individual exercises. This is typically done in a semi-structured fashion, with each person verbally stating how the event or process affected them and what it meant to them in relation to their participation within the group. Debriefing also offers the opportunity for people to bring a sense of closure or ending to whatever they have been working on. When a seemingly intractable group dynamic has established, such as being deadlocked on a particular topic, often the opportunity of debriefing can reveal new ways of addressing the problem.

Whether by choice or by appointment, whenever one assumes the leadership of a group they need to be cognizant of the role and responsibilities they are taking on with respect to facilitating the group towards a successful conclusion. While people may not always remember the effective groups they have participated on, you can be assured they will almost always remember the ones that were not effective. Continue to build upon and practice your skills as a facilitator, striving towards the active engagement and involvement of people in your group.

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