Facilitation team roles and skills

Facilitators play at least five roles. The basic reason for this is that stakeholders in a meeting, mediation or other process need different things at different times. Unlike a judge or an arbitrator, professional mediators and facilitators have to be positioned and trained to meet these various needs.

The essence of making these roles work, whether they are all played by one person or distributed to several, is to be explicit about them. Facilitators need to develop an instinct to know which role is required at any one time, to adopt it without fuss, and to ensure others know what is going on.

This guide focuses on the skills that a facilitator will need when facilitating and/or mediating. Which skills are associated with each team role and a description of each role are spelled out throughout the guide.

The reasons for this differentiation of role are that, without a clear understanding between the members of the team, there is a danger of three types of misunderstanding:

1. *duplication in which two (or more) team members act to achieve the same thing - quite often in different ways - leading to straightforward waste of effort;*

2. *contradiction in which two (or more) team members do things - often to achieve different ends - which at best cancel each other out and at worst lead to seriously negative results;*

3. *omission in which two (or more) team members each think that the other is going to take on the particular task - leading to neither doing it.*

It is most important that the team agrees explicitly about who is going to do what, and when.

Some of the skills are innate, others are learnt. All can be improved through practice. They are covered in five sub-sections, one for each role.
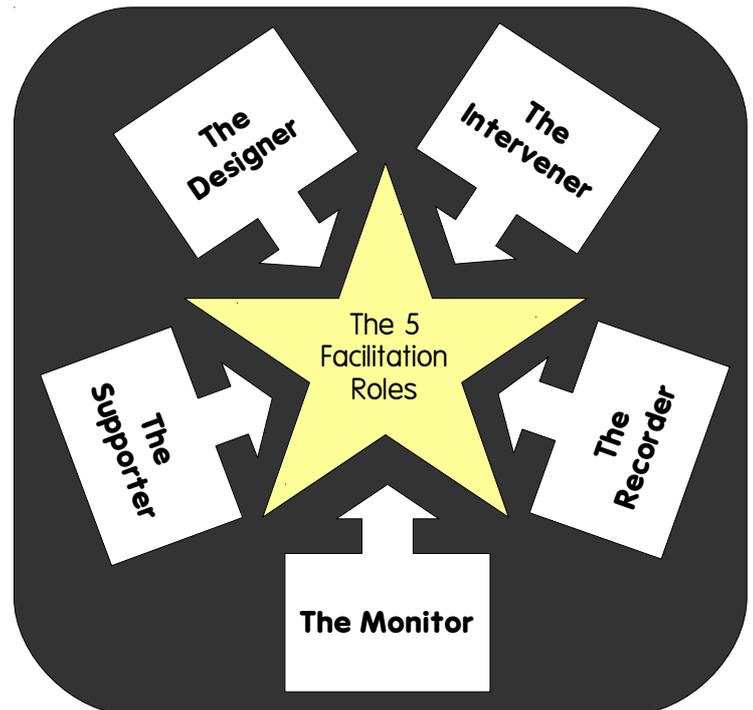
However, whilst the facilitation team can work on its own, there is no doubt that it will find it much more effective to operate in close harmony with the project co-ordination team. In addition, it is possible that an honest broker may be involved.

While the skills associated with the project co-ordination team's roles are not the direct concern of the facilitator or mediator, it is helpful for them to recognise them as a means of promoting working relationships which are more effective.

The designer

Consensus-building is a designer process. Rather than using an off-the-shelf format to address a contentious problem, for example a public enquiry, a citizen's jury or statutory public participation (sometimes described as consultation), it involves designing precisely the right process to produce the best possible solution which is acceptable to all concerned.

The designer is responsible for designing every aspect of the process from what is happening at every moment to how it is happening. The designer cannot, of course, control everything: but even the uncontrolled parts of the process should happen at a time and in a context that are intentional rather than random. All members of the team are involved in designing - sometimes all together and most often in preparation, but also from time to time during an event.

1. Scheduling

Scheduling is the art of maintaining forward movement without people feeling they are being dragooned into doing something do not want to do, while at the same time ensuring sufficient momentum is maintained to keep people involved and excited.

2. Grouping

Getting the right people to any meeting promotes feelings of being effective and avoids waste of less involved participants' time.

3. Aiming/directing

The purpose of design is not to be taken by surprise: or at least only to be surprised within acceptable limits. A designed meeting heads in a more or less pre-determined direction with a pre-determined purpose, even if its full products and final outcome are unpredictable.

4. Programming

Designing is mostly about the specifics of the facilitator's ability to decide what should be done, by whom, and when. However, the effective, mediator/facilitator recognises that it is most important to see those decisions in the context of the project as a whole. This means taking into account all those activities that are complementary to the specific task of conducting the interactive sessions in order to generate a broad base of support for the consensus that is developing in the main group.

Designer Skills: Scheduling

❍ *Being realistic in scheduling meetings. It takes longer to do most things than one ever expects, especially if many people have to be informed and encouraged.*

❍ *Avoiding the scheduling of something that may have to be postponed if cancelled - unless it is designed as a contingency plan.*

❍ *When looking for meeting dates, canvassing as many as possible choosing the one most widely accepted even if it is some time ahead, and confirming by telephone and by writing immediately.*

❍ *Sending reminders of scheduled meetings ten days before.*

❍ *Not scheduling a meeting if you know any significant participants cannot attend unless there is absolutely no alternative. Even then, do not schedule the meeting until you have discussed it with the likely absentee.*

❍ *Being aware of advantages and dangers of discipline created by regular meetings (e.g. first Monday each month) - easy diarising' versus occasionally unnecessary meetings.*

❍ *Being aware of advantages of flexible scheduling — effort supplied intensively when needed.*

Caution: *The desire to make progress can lead to an intense programme that leaves little time for representatives to talk properly to their constituents.*

Designer Skills: Grouping

❍ *Recognising the needs of individual participants and where, when and with whom they can be most effective.*

❍ *Allowing the membership of a group to vary according to the focus of the work and the stage of the process.*

❍ *Identifying stakeholders and analysing their concerns*

❍ *Structuring participation patterns*

❍ *Probing to uncover gaps in the representation*

Caution: *Excluded participants can feel actively rejected unless the reasons for your grouping are explained to them and their role made explicit.*

Designer Skills: Aiming/ directing

❍ *Being clear about the desired outcomes of the process from your point of view*

❍ *Asking yourself: how will you know when you have them?*

❍ *Deciding what is within your control, what is not and how much uncertainty you can live with*

❍ *Designing the process that is most likely to achieve what you have decided is most useful to achieve*

❍ *Reducing the desired outcomes to a series of achievable steps*

❍ *Thinking carefully through all the consequences of achieving these outcomes.*

Caution: *Although it is the participants who ultimately make the running as far as content goes, it is the facilitator who gets the blame if something goes wrong. The purpose of design is to reduce the chances of the process self destructing. If in doubt, go for a few small, positive outcomes rather than a more uncertain major triumph.*

Designer Skills: Programming

❍ *Ensuring a balance between the main events and keeping the wider network in touch by providing information externally. This requires a communications strategy.*

❍ *Maintaining a feeling of progress and continuity for all those involved, while ensuring that the project does not move so fast that the wider network cannot be 'brought along', or feels 'railroaded'.*

❍ *Providing for small group sessions in between the main events so that progress can be made on detailed matters in preparation for the work of the main events.*

The intervener

The most obvious role the facilitator plays is the intervener: the person who comes between those who oppose each other, and through a subtle blend of tact and diplomacy enables them to work together - even if they still don't like each other very much.

'Tact' and 'diplomacy', however, cover a multitude of quite specific skills, from how to balance differences in power to acting as a time-keeper.

Of all the roles of a facilitator in consensus-building, that of the intervener requires the most acute use of eyes and ears, the neatest footwork, the most sensitive use of verbal and non-verbal language. It is also in the intervener role that the facilitator is most exposed, most vulnerable, and most challenged. It is also the most fun.

1. Guiding

This is a delicate subject, given that it is supposed to be the participants who call the tune. The strict answer is that the intervener leads on process but not on content. In practice, given that the intervener is also a designer, inevitably there is an impact on both process and content.

2. Balancing power

There are inequalities of power in every situation, and both the more powerful and less powerful are liable to accuse the intervener of bias. The intervener has to find a way for everyone to perceive them as impartial, while at the same time preventing inequalities of power getting in the way of progress.

3. Reflecting and clarifying

One of the major roles of the facilitator is to help people know their own minds.

4. Focusing

Detailed, specific and/or parochial arguments can easily cause the stakeholders to lose sight of their main controversy. The intervener has to ensure that participants are focusing on the right thing at the right moment.

5. Timing

Timing is the art of both managing the usually limited available time and doing the right thing at the right moment.

Intervener Skills: Guiding

❍ *Ensuring a balance between the main events and keeping the wider network in touch by providing information externally. This requires a communications strategy.*

❍ *Maintaining a feeling of progress and continuity for all those involved, while ensuring that the project does not move so fast that the wider network cannot be 'brought along', or feels 'railroaded'.*

❍ *Providing for small group sessions in between the main events so that progress can be made on detailed matters in preparation for the work of the main events.*

Intervener Skills: Balancing power

❏ Giving out-numbered representatives more opportunities

❏ Helping participants to differentiate between power and capability by assessing the former at its source and the latter at its point of impact

❏ Helping participants to recognise different types of power and to appreciate the full extent of whatever capability they have

❏ If one party is using its power to intimidate another or to skew the process in its favour, exploring with them the possible risks and consequences of an inequitable process or an unfair outcome

❏ Asking the participants how their deployment of power differences by building relationships based on trust and recognition of shared needs and interests.

Caution: *There are situations where an extreme imbalance of power renders the use of consensus-building inappropriate or open to abuse by the more powerful party. If this might be the case, alert everyone to the possibility and how it might be averted. If the more powerful cannot accept implicit restraints on their domination of the process, consider aborting it in the interests of all parties: an inequitable process cannot produce a sustainable outcome.*

Intervener Skills: Timing

❏ Planning the distribution of the time available when the agenda is agreed

❏ Being realistic how long people need to have their say and planning conservatively

❏ Building in' flexi-time' and letting people choose how to use it

❏ Learning to recognise when people need to stay with the subject in hand, and when they need to move on even if there is more to say

❏ Being wary of hitting a subject too early and before the moment is ripe; or intervening when people need to let off steam.

Caution: *In general, it is better to intervene too late than too early.*

Intervener Skills: Reflecting & clarifying

❏ Reflecting back to them what they say, and asking awkward questions about its implications.

❏ Relating what they say to their stated desires and outcomes for the process in which they have agreed to participate

❏ Asking the person how their statement might be interpreted or misinterpreted by those who do not share the same perspectives

❏ Clarifying by asking that person for concrete examples of what they mean - eliminate by abstractions and meaningless generalisations

❏ Clarifying by watching out for out-of-date or distorted information

❏ Watching out for jargon, technical terms, local expressions or any references that provoke expressions of surprise or disagreement: seek clarification of anything that anybody appears not to understand or share.

Caution: *Sometimes clarification of issues will lead to further polarisation. Learn to recognise the times when some degree of fog and fudging may be essential if there is to be progress. Never ask anyone to 'clarify their position': the mark of the amateur mediator*

Intervener Skills: Focusing

❏ Helping participants focus to examine an issue in greater details

❏ Helping them to stand back when they need to see the bigger picture, the wider consequences.

❏ Helping them also to focus from a number of angles: to see the situation from the point of view of an community member, a politician, a local councillor, a youth worker or a religious leader for example.

The recorder

Consensus-building processes have to produce consensus as a result. It is usually expressed in the form of a written record. The creation of that record, which must reflect the participation of all the stakeholders, is the responsibility of the recorder.

But it is much more than that. The recorder helps to maintain momentum within the meetings, by allowing the intervener to concentrate fully on the participants, and between the meetings through circulation of the record in the form of a report.

The recorder is responsible for the visible products of the process. The record of what has been happening, what is agreed and what is not agreed is written on large sheets of paper on the wall. It becomes, in effect, the minutes of the meeting - written and agreed as they happen.

But recording is not the same as passive minute taking: it is an activity which contributes directly to the consensus-building process, and which facilitates other features of the process. For example, wall-writing helps to keep stakeholders focused on the problem - as opposed to on each other.

1. Wall-writing

Some facility with pen and flipchart adds enormously to the facilitator's credibility and self-confidence.

2. Paper management

Consensus-building is apt to generate large amounts of paper, often in the form of flipchart sheets plastered all over the walls.

3. Key-wording

This is the business of reducing the complex verbiage of disputes to make it more manageable.

4. Photo reporting

Reports of meetings need to reflect exactly what participants have said. Conventional minute-taking is open to accusation of bias - and anyway may not capture some key points in the actual words of the person who made them - which is important for building ownership and meeting results. One way around this is to do a 'photo-report'. Simply photograph each flipchart, paste the photographs onto sheets of A4 (you get four per page), photocopy and distribute. Photo reporting is a rapid means of recording information from flipcharts, and saves you having to stagger home with tons of paper. It also removes the temptation to clean up what is on them — and when the participants have been coaxed into doing some of the recording, it has the advantage that they can see themselves in the result. Finally, photo-reports should ideally only be distributed to the people who attended the meeting - we all know what gibberish flipcharts can seem if you weren't there - and something said in jest or as a wild idea may be misinterpreted by someone who wasn't there.

Recorder Skills: Wall writing

❍ *Writing on flip-chart paper without smudging the ink, writing too small or too large, or running out of paper*

❍ *Use dark coloured pens to ensure photos come out clearly*

❍ *Capturing complex arguments in bullet points and without offending the proponent*

❍ *Knowing when it is essential to record the exact words of a speaker, and when a paraphrase would be more appropriate*

❍ *Sorting the material, which has been produced in a logical manner, and making sure your flip charts are clearly numbered and referenced*

❍ *Design some report sheets onto which to stick the photographs — detailing the meeting, the date, page number etc*

Caution: *While it may be necessary to wait some time before the main arguments become clear, waiting too long before beginning to record can lead to essential material being left off the record..*

Recorder Skills: Paper management

❍ *Keeping track of who is generating what by referencing every sheet*

❍ *Being able to work on more than one sheet at a time*

❍ *Moving flip-charts around so that the movement and noise are not too much of a distraction*

❍ *Grouping/clustering the flip-charts, and keeping participants informed of what is being done so that the most relevant flip-charts do not get lost under more recent but less significant ones.*

Recorder Skills: Key wording

❍ *Capturing complex thoughts and ideas and concerns in one or two words that neither understate nor overstate the original*

❍ *Knowing when you must use the exact words of participants*

❍ *Securing agreement to the words you use even though they may not be exactly those used by participants.*

Caution: *There are times when the dialogue is moving ahead so fast that you can get left behind - so it is a fine judgment as to when to ask them to wait while you catch up. The reverse can also happen - usually when a discussion is first launched. There seems to be little of relevance to record, but if it is not recorded immediately, it is very difficult to start and to catch up once you do. Record it anyway - they will soon see what is happening and get back on track.*

Reporter Skills: Photo reporting

❍ *Having a fully charged digital camera at the ready (or a camera loaded with film)*

❍ *Ensuring good quality, legible prints, by careful control of lighting and printing processes*

❍ *Organising and ordering the information to make it an accessible and comprehensive report of the meeting.*

Caution: *It is possible that the photographs do not come out as well as expected or the film is somehow lost or destroyed or digital images deleted. To avoid a serious loss of credibility, as well as the record, it pays to keep the flipcharts until the film has been safely processed.*

The monitor

Everything - people relationships, content, and process - comes under the magnifying glass in facilitation. As a monitor, the facilitator uses what is visible through the magnifying glass to move the process forward: observing, analysing, evaluating and feeding this information back into the process.

The monitor supplies the built-in checks and balances of consensus-building by feeding the necessary information to the other roles.

This is achieved most effectively by standing apart (sometimes literally) from the hustle and bustle of the event. By being able to observe, analyse, evaluate and reflect on what is happening in this way, the monitor obtains knowledge, insights and understanding that it is impossible for those in the other roles to obtain.

1. Observing

Observing is primarily a matter of knowing what to look for and noticing it when it happens.

2. Analysing

Analysing is making sense of what you notice, and seeing how it fits in to the broader patterns of behaviour and relationships.

3. Evaluating

Formal and explicit evaluation forms are used to monitor the participants' perceptions of the work's progress or lack of it. In addition to these formal evaluations, the monitor should be constantly noticing who is happy and who is not.

Monitor Skills: Observing

❍ Peripheral vision: and the ability to look (and listen) in several different directions at the same time.

❍ Rapid recall: very often, it is the changes in people's behaviour which are most crucial to notice, and that means remembering how they were previously.

❍ Noticing patterns of relationships and coalition as they wax and wane.

Monitor Skills: Analysing

❍ Using changes in what is happening to help predict what will happen next

❍ Recognising what is going on and which technique will enhance or prevent it

❍ Relating what is going on to its timing: so that a promising development is not cut off in its prime.

Monitor Skills: Evaluating

❍ *Interpreting non-verbal and unconscious communication*

❍ *Looking for indicators of a need for a change in style or pace.*

❍ *Perceiving general levels of comfort and attention among participants.*

❍ *Keeping the facilitation team accurately advised of what is going on, particularly in multi-party situations*

❍ *Being ready with the proposal for evaluation scales and format when needed.*

Caution: *There is always a temptation to try to pass on an insight as soon as it is gained - but this may not be the best time in terms of the process as a whole. The best way is to have an agreed way of making it known to the intervener that you have something to say. The intervener can then make a judgement about the right moment to 'bring you in'. Remember to express this sort of feedback in the form of a question so that the intervener, who may have other ideas, can easily put it to one side. If it is very serious, it would probably be best to ask for a process break.*

The supporter

The supporter is responsible for the smooth running of the event so far as everything practical is concerned. Part of the role is thus domestic and functional, but some of it bears directly on the technical aspects of the whole endeavour. Another part is concerned with keeping the external world at bay.

It is a role that is conventionally considered to be somewhat lowly because some of the tasks can be menial. However, the experienced facilitator knows that it is impossible for other members of the facilitation team to provide a good quality service without adequate support. The supporter has to be as well qualified as the rest of the team.

The supporter's job is to ensure that the stakeholders are fed and watered, and generally as comfortable and as happy as circumstances permits. Enabling people to relax and feel physically secure is an essential prelude to helping them lower the other barriers that keep them apart.

Understanding of human relations is essential. The role includes making participants feel welcome, especially when they arrive late, as well as the more general one of bringing people together at informal moments and helping them to relate cordially to each other even when their inclination dictate otherwise. These activities provide an ideal opportunity to undertake some of the monitor's role from a position that is usually perceived to be non-threatening. The supporter is also expected to manage all the practical aspects of an event. For example, making sure the rooms - the physical spaces within which meetings take place - are appropriate to the needs of the occasion is a distinct skill.

Provision of a well-equipped tool kit with all the relevant equipment on-hand at the right moment also requires intimate understanding of the process.

There is also a vital gate-keeping role. It has two aspects: firstly coordinating the stakeholders' relations with those outside the process, especially the news media; and secondly coordinating the stakeholders' and the teams' relations with the facility management staff - such as cleaning, catering, and accommodation.

1. Resourcing

It is essential that participants have the resources they need at the moment they need them. Ideally they should not have to ask for anything.

2. Housekeeping

People need to be comfortable if the intensity of this work is to be sustainable.

3. Harmonising

The supporter is not just a glorified flunky: support of the process's human dimensions is also essential.

4. Gate Keeping

Consensus-building often involves sensitive and controversial issues that attract media speculation. The world must sometimes be kept at bay; at other times it must be kept informed and even entertained.

Supporter Skills: Resourcing

❍ *Providing interpretation (where more than one language is required)*

❍ *Providing translation services*

❍ *Providing sufficient supplies of paper (A4, flipchart)*

❍ *Providing pens (coloured for wall-writing)*

❍ *Establishing photocopying facilities*

❍ *Making internet enabled PCs, fax machines and telephones available.*

Caution: *Do not give the participants cause to think that you attach more importance to the hardware than to them.*

Supporter Skills: Housekeeping

❍ *Ensuring adequate plenary and break-out spaces*

❍ *Laying out furniture in a way that facilitates the purpose of the session*

❍ *Checking that the rooms are all at the same, comfortable temperature*

❍ *Ensuring external noise and disturbances are kept to minimum*

❍ *Arranging that food and drink are available as and when necessary*

❍ *Ensuring that staff in the venue are sensitive and swift to the needs of the occasion.*

Caution: *Make sure room arrangements and catering are flexible and always subordinate to the needs of the occasion.*

Supporter Skills: Harmonising

❍ *Making participants feel welcome*

❍ *Ensuring people are introduced to each at the earliest opportunity*

❍ *Creating a climate a common purpose*

❍ *Enabling people to disagree strongly and yet continue working together in a civilised manner.*

Caution: *Do not bludgeon people into being cosy with their enemies until they want to be.*

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