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Secrets of Successful Facilitators

We spent the past 10 years in some futile field research. We interviewed and observed several facilitators and the groups they facilitated in an attempt to identify the secrets of effective facilitation.

These facilitators were selected on the basis of high ratings by their peers and participants for a positive process and productive results. Initial data from our observations and interviews were disappointing and confusing. We did not find consistent, common behaviors among these effective facilitators. Further, even the same facilitator appeared to use different behaviors with different groups, even when conducting the same small-group activity. The same facilitator sometimes used different behaviors with the same group within the same activity at different times. As we collected and classified more data and reflected on the patterns, we realized the real secret of effective facilitators was buried within the apparent inconsistency. We re-examined the data and came up with these five conclusions:

Effective facilitators are

- **Flexible.** They modify their small-group activities before and during use.
- **Adaptive.** They modify their small-group activities along six critical tensions.
- **Proactive.** Before using a small-group activity, they modify it on the basis of the characteristics of the participants and the purpose of the activity.
- **Responsive.** They make modifications during the small-group activity to keep the different tensions within acceptable ranges.
- **Resilient.** They accept whatever happens during the small-group activity as valuable data and smoothly continue with the activity.

To capture the flexibility demonstrated by effective facilitators, we need to understand the tensions on which this flexibility is based. Our analysis suggests six critical tensions within any small-group activity that can be powerful in enhancing or destroying its effectiveness. These tensions are identified in the following behaviorally-anchored rating scales:

THE SIX TENSIONS IN SMALL-GROUP ACTIVITIES

Structure: How rigidly or flexibly should the small-group activity be implemented?

1. **Tightest:** Explain the rules in detail at the beginning and enforce them rigidly.
2. **Tight:** Announce the rules in the beginning and enforce them fairly strictly.

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3. **Neutral:** Give an overview of the rules and enforce them flexibly.
4. **Loose:** Explain the rules only when needed and apply them loosely.
5. **Loosest:** Make up the rules as you go along and use them arbitrarily.

Pace: How rapidly or leisurely should the small-group activity be implemented?

1. **Fastest:** Constantly rush the participants and impose tight time limits.
2. **Fast:** Keep the activity moving at a fairly fast pace.
3. **Neutral:** Keep the activity moving at a comfortable pace.
4. **Slow:** Keep the activity proceeding at a fairly slow pace.
5. **Slowest:** Constantly slow down the activity.

Interaction: How do group members relate to each other?

1. **Most cooperative:** Maintain a high level of cooperation by focusing on external threats and obstacles.
2. **Cooperative:** De-emphasize scores and encourage the participants to help each other.
3. **Neutral:** Maintain a balance between cooperation and competition
4. **Competitive:** Keep scores and encourage participants to outperform their opponents.
5. **Most competitive:** Encourage cut-throat competition by constantly pointing out that winning is the only thing, and announce a reward to be given to the winner.

Focus: Which is more important, a positive procedure or efficient results?

1. **Most process-focused:** Keep the activity interesting, playful, and creative.
2. **Process-focused:** Keep the activity enjoyable.
3. **Neutral:** Maintain a balance between an enjoyable procedure and efficient results.
4. **Results-focused:** De-emphasize the enjoyment of the activity and focus on getting the job done.
5. **Most results-focused:** Constantly emphasize the goals, results, and outcomes of the activity

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Concern: Are we most concerned about individual or group needs?

1. **Greatest individual concern:** Focus on individual needs and ignore group needs.
2. **Individual concern:** Focus a little bit more on individual needs than on group needs.
3. **Neutral:** Maintain a balance between individual needs and group needs.
4. **Group concern:** Focus a little more on group needs than individual needs.
5. **Greatest group concern:** Focus on group needs and ignore individual needs.

Control: Where should group members look for direction and validation?

1. **Most internal:** Take an unobtrusive role. Let the group decide what is valuable to them.
2. **Internal:** Take a background role. Avoid giving suggestions and feedback.
3. **Neutral:** Maintain a balance between participating and withdrawing from group activities.
4. **External:** Take a consultant role. Give suggestions and feedback.
5. **Most external:** Take a leadership role. Provide authoritative advice and evaluation.

MAINTAINING A BALANCE

When a newcomer to group facilitation asks me, "Should I keep the small-group activity moving at a fast pace or a slow one?" I usually answer, "Yes." The appropriate location of an activity along the six tensions depends on several factors, including the number and type of participants and the structure and purpose of the activity.

The secret of effective facilitation is to make these tensions transparent. This is achieved by maintaining a balance between the two poles of each tension. Unfortunately, however, "balance" resides in the perception of the participants rather than in outside reality. Thus, the balance between cooperation and competition may differ drastically between a group from California and a group from New York, or between a group of top managers and a group of technicians from the same organization.

TACTICS TO OVERCOME TENSIONS

The first step in making the tensions transparent is to avoid the extremes (positions 1 and 5 in the rating scale). Beyond that, you may use a variety of tactics to increase or decrease the elements in each tension. Here are a couple of sample tactics for each element:

To tighten the structure. . .

Begin with a detailed explanation of the rules of the activity. Stress the importance of adhering to these rules. Provide a printed copy of the rules to each participant. Frequently refer to these rules.

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To loosen the structure. . .

Acknowledge that the participants will be initially confused. Reassure them it is not absolutely necessary to stick to the rules. Don't present all the rules in the beginning. Introduce the rules only if and when they are required.

To speed up the pace. . .

Begin the activity promptly and get it rolling fast. Announce and implement intermediate time limits.

To slow down the pace. . .

Announce and implement minimum time requirements. If a participant or a team finishes the task before this time is up, insist on review and revision. Introduce a quality-control rule that punishes participants and teams for turning in sloppy ideas or products.

To increase competition. . .

Use a scoring system to reward effective performance. Periodically announce and compare the scores of different individuals or teams. Reward the winning team with a valuable prize.

To increase cooperation. . .

Reduce the conflict among the participants and increase the conflict between the participants and external constraints (for example, time limits). Use multiple criteria for determining the winners: Reward individuals or teams for speed, quality, efficiency, fluency, creativity, novelty, and other such factors.

To increase the focus on the process. . .

Make the procedure more enjoyable by introducing game elements such as bonus scores and chance. From time to time, stop the procedure and undertake a process check. Let the participants suggest changes for making the procedure more interesting.

To increase the focus on the results. . .

Use a scoring system to reward efficient performance by individuals or teams. Stop the procedure and discuss the desired results. Have the participants commit themselves to getting the job done.

To pay more attention to individual needs. . .

If participants are at different levels of skill or knowledge, organize them into teams of approximately equal strength. Encourage timid people to participate more by providing them with additional information and responsibilities.

To pay more attention to group needs. . .

Identify dominant participants and give them additional roles (for example, keeping score or taking notes) to channel their excess energy. Have the team conduct periodic process checks to make sure everyone's needs are met.

To increase external control. . .

Turn the lights off to get everyone's attention before making important announcements. Use confederates among the participants and in different teams to ensure external command and control.

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To increase internal control. . .

Explain your role as that of a facilitator rather than those of a leader or an expert. When participants ask you a procedural question (for example, "What should we do next?"), refer it back to the group with a question such as "What would YOU like to do next?"

A PROCEDURAL MODEL FOR EFFECTIVE FACILITATION

The tactics listed above for maintaining a balance among the six tensions in a small-group activity are for illustrative purposes only. Brainstorming additional tactics of this nature may actually be an excellent topic for an initial activity.

Knowing these tactics does not guarantee you will become an effective facilitator. You need to know when and how to use them. Here's a six-step procedural model for using the tension-adjustment tactics before, during, and after a small-group activity.

Step 1. Identify your preferences.

Flexible facilitation does not mean that you should not have personal preferences, but you should be aware of these preferences and keep them under control. For example, I prefer a fairly loose structure, fast pace, cooperative interaction, results focus, individual concern, and external control. It is important to be aware of your biases and to realize they may not meet the needs of the group.

The best way to discover your biases is to recall your own small-group experiences in which you felt very positive or very negative and to analyze the factors that contributed to those feelings. You may also talk to your colleagues and participants for their opinions about your biases. Once you are aware of them, remind yourself to relegate them to the background whenever necessary.

Step 2. Identify participant preferences.

Before planning a small-group activity, you need to collect information on the likely preferences of your participants along each of the six tension areas. The best source of information is a representative sample from the group. The best strategy for collecting the information is to interview the participants using the behavioral scale presented earlier.

To cross-check your information you may wish to talk to other facilitators, consultants, and trainers who are familiar with the group.

Step 3. Design or revise the small-group activity to suit participant preferences.

Whether you are designing a new simulation game or using an existing one, integrate your understanding of the participants' preferences into the activity. Carefully work through the steps and rules of the activity to decide where they appear to be located along each tension. For example, if there are several complex rules that are rigid, the activity will be perceived to be too tight by most participants--unless their preference is for a high degree of structure.

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When you identify tension areas at one extreme or another, use appropriate tactics to make suitable adjustments. During this step, you may want to work with a few members of your participant group and with a few knowledgeable colleagues to ensure that your design adjustments are appropriate.

Step 4. Conduct the small-group activity.

With the appropriate initial adjustments, you should start the activity with confidence. Do not worry about making additional adjustments at this stage. Present an overview of the process and the desired products to get the group started.

Step 5. Make modifications on the fly.

As your participants work through the activity, continuously monitor the levels of various tensions. If the six tensions are at optimum levels, do not interfere with the flow of the activity. However, there is no such thing as a perfect small-group activity, and some tensions are likely to become prominent from time to time. Wait a little while to see if the group makes its own adjustments. Most groups, especially experienced ones, work out their own system of reducing the tensions. With inexperienced groups, you may need to intervene with appropriate adjustments. Do this as quickly and as unobtrusively as possible. Continue monitoring the group and adjusting the simulation game as required.

Step 6. Debrief the group.

Even after the activity is completed, you still have a critical step to undertake. Conduct a debriefing session with all participants immediately, and with a few selected participants later, to collect information on their perceptions of different tension levels. This can be done in a few minutes by asking the participants questions based on the rating scale such as, "When did you feel the activity was too tightly structured?" or "When did you feel the facilitator interrupted you too often?" Take notes on the participants' responses and use them to balance the same activity with future groups or activities with the same group.

The effectiveness of small-group activities depends heavily on the flexibility of the facilitator. Whether you are a newcomer or an old-timer, you can improve your effectiveness by attending to and adjusting structure, pace, interaction, focus, concern, and control of your small-group activity.

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