

The Science—and Art—of Team Facilitation

By Nicki Roth

As your team files out of the weekly leadership meeting, what do you imagine they are thinking? “Fantastic meeting!” “What a great exchange of ideas.” “I’m so glad that we arrived at a timely decision so we can move forward.”

If so, you must have a great imagination, or maybe you are one of the fortunate few who has mastered the hard work of planning and facilitating teams. Sadly, most of us walk out of team meetings and wish we had that hour back.

Facilitating teams and the meetings you have with them is among the most vexing and frequent concerns of my leadership clients. The challenges fall into three buckets: insufficient or no team facilitation skills, few positive examples in their experience banks, and challenging group dynamics. The good news is that it is possible to learn team facilitation skills. There is a science you can study and practice. Team dynamics, however, are more complex, nuanced, and daunting. This is where the art of facilitation comes in.

Three Things that Impact Good Team Facilitation

There are three areas that influence good team facilitation: team development stages, structure, and discussion management.

- **Forming, storming, norming, and performing.** These are the stages of team development. Members convene and set goals during the forming stage. At this point, team members are primarily interested in the “who” and the “what” questions: Who are the people I’m working with? Who is running the show? What are we supposed to be doing together? As those questions are answered, the team moves into the **storming** phase. Opposition and subgroups develop as members jockey for favorable status with the leader. During this tough phase, it is the leader’s role to help team members accept their differences and focus on what needs to be accomplished. This paves the way for formal and informal **norms** to develop, and the group settles into a good operational rhythm. The team can then buckle down to **perform** its work productively. (For further reading, I recommend reading this summary of [Bruce Tuckman’s model](#).)

- **Structure is essential for team meetings.** Good disciplines to establish structure include agendas, time management, note taking, and follow up on action items. A meeting without an agenda is bound for failure. Be sure that it is not overcrowded or only filled with status updates. Each item needs time for explanation, discussion, and identification of what happens next. At the end of the meeting, share notes with follow-up actions to hold team members responsible for decisions made during the discussion.
- **Manage the voices.** All teams have members who like to take over the conversation, cut people off, sit silently, and/or shoot down ideas. Your job is to ask some to back off and others to speak up. “I’d like to hear from Susan” is a polite way to stop Andy. “Jerry, you clearly have something on your mind” invites the cross-armed, scowl-faced team member to enter the discussion or to mind his body language. Properly directing the flow of conversation to equalize it will encourage quiet people to join in and respectfully tamp down the disrupters..

A Facilitation Success Story

One of my clients, Janelle, developed several habits to calm her own anxiety and manage potentially disruptive team dynamics. She set an agenda for each meeting, and during the meeting, she would begin each agenda item with a one- or two-sentence description followed by an open-ended question: “We have a budget gap of \$7,000 that we need to close before the next fiscal year. We had some unexpected facilities expenses that needed to be handled. I’d like to get some shared thinking on this. Without protecting your own turf too intensely, where can we find the funds?” She became very adept at these opening questions to signal her preference for a collective instead of a territorial direction for the conversation.

After asking her question, she invited the person to her left to respond. In turn, she called on each person by name to share his or her idea. If she had follow-up questions, she asked them. Janelle never interjected her own thoughts; she only asked questions to hear from others. She did not invite cross-talk at this stage. She held a belief that if the best thinking came from the team, then the commitment to the action plan would be stronger. She worked hard to resist her urge to jump in or steer the direction.

Once everyone had shared their ideas, Janelle described what she heard as the common ground shared by many. Then she listed the outlier ideas. At this point in the meeting, everyone had received a chance to speak uninterrupted, Janelle had acknowledged everyone’s opinion, and the mood was collaborative.

The habits Janelle developed helped the team to contribute in respectful and productive ways. They also allowed her to reduce her own fears, so she wasn’t overwhelmed by individual agendas and voices. Her skills combined some structure with acute listening and self-awareness: science and art.

Tips for Facilitating Team Meetings

- Use of self. If you feel uneasy, so does everyone else. Use that awareness to intervene rather than attribute it to your own anxiety. “What’s going on? Something feels off base.”
- Hit the pause button. If things get too off track, awkward, or emotionally charged, simply stop the conversation. “We are way off track. The conversation is devolving. Everybody take a deep breath and refocus on this key question.”
- Listen more, talk less. Use active listening skills and nonverbal cues, such as a head nod or steady eye contact, to indicate you hear what others are saying. Ask questions and don’t interrupt the responses.
- Speak last. As the leader, your voice will be heard and weighted more than other voices. To minimize the possibility of some members not speaking up while others pile on to support your thinking, don’t talk until you have heard from everyone.
- Use visual aids. Flip charts, white boards, or computer projectors are great tools to help track the ideas and decisions shared by the team. The ability for the group to see that you have tracked each item in verbatim language empowers people to speak up. This is much harder to achieve with individually generated notes.
- Model building on others’ ideas. Demonstrate the value of each person’s ideas by adding onto them rather than restating the same thing in your own words.
- Manage the participation. Allow everyone to safely and equally enter the conversation. Don’t allow dominant team members to take over or for the more silent ones to check out.
- Stop all disrespectful remarks. The moment the tone or words become combative, you must call it out. “Your language is unacceptable and outside of our norms. If you can’t rephrase that in a helpful way, let’s move on.” Passion for or against an idea is fine. Personal attacks are not.

Conclusion

As nonprofit leaders, you may feel overwhelmed by the complexity of team dynamics. As team members, you may feel frustrated that the team isn't being productive. Leading and facilitating teams requires specific skills that can be taught. There is verifiable science on the subject. Learning how to navigate the layers of human interactions takes self-awareness, a willingness to take some risks, patience, and lots of practice. Learning these skills has an incredible return on investment for your organization, your team, and your leadership role.



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