

## Facilitation – A Short Guide for Managers

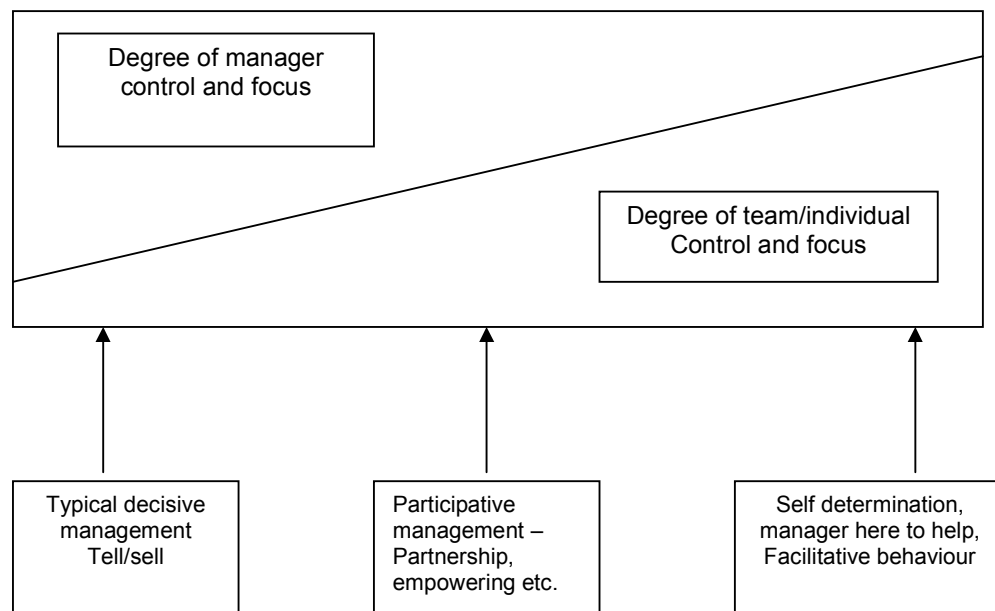
**Facilitation is an often used word and an often misunderstood concept. We hear managers say things like ‘I need to facilitate my team’ or ‘I am a facilitative team leader’. The intention is honourable but management and facilitation are different, although good managers are often good at facilitative behaviour. Confused? Read on!**

1. The whole essence of facilitation is that the facilitator is independent of, and therefore largely unaffected by, the team, group, issue or problem. It is argued that unless the facilitator is independent, he or she is of no help to the group as it would be too tempting to dive into the discussion and ‘get involved’. Conversely managers who try to facilitate by staying out of the issue are guilty of denying their quite proper expertise to the team. In contrast good facilitators look after the process and leave the group or team to look after the content.
2. Good facilitation can...
  - Act as a catalyst for change (remember a catalyst changes the substance it passes through without being changed itself).
  - Make a process easier.
  - Guide without directing, bring about change without disruption, encourage the knocking down walls of communication which have been built between people whilst preserving structures of value, and above all, appreciate people as people. All of this must be done without leaving any fingerprints.
  - Assist groups and individuals in their search for solutions to their problems and issues by a range of enabling behaviours (see tools below)
  - Help a group to work together in a collaborative way, by focussing on the process of how the team’s participants work together.

### **3. What facilitators are not!**

- Management representatives
- Team leaders
- Chairmen
- Participants in the team
- Advocates, representatives, or negotiators for the team
- Gurus
- Providers of solutions

4. Therefore true facilitation is
  - Independent
  - Impartial
  - Concerned with process
  - Best when asked for rather than imposed on a team, and
  - Catalytical.
  
5. However, team leaders can behave facilitatively, as long as there is no confusion over their primary role. In other words team leaders cannot pretend to be a facilitator when their true role is to move the team towards some predetermined outcome.
  
6. The following diagram helps to explain the range of behaviours and focus available to the team leader



7. There are clear links here to some of the concepts covered in Vital Signs 1, namely the manager/leader/coach model and situational leadership.
  
8. When managers use facilitative behaviour they are operating more towards the right hand side of this continuum. Note also that the diagonal dividing line never reaches either corner. This is to signify that the manager should never completely exclude staff from involvement in shaping the relationship, nor can the manager be cut out of the relationship either.
  
9. Managers who can add facilitative behaviours to their tool kit are likely to be more effective than those who only operate on the left of the diagram. This is because facilitative behaviours do the following.
  - They unlock people's ability to solve their own problems, and over time this reduces dependency on the manager,

- They encourage reflective practice, something that is quite common amongst clinical professions but largely absent from management practice,
  - They prevent the headlong rush from problem identification to problem solution, by slowing down the thinking process and allowing a greater depth of thought,
  - They overtly demonstrate the manager's commitment to support staff, treating them as individuals, and thereby creating an environment where real issues, motivations and ambitions are more likely to be uncovered.
10. Facilitative behaviour for team leaders fall into the following main themes.
- **Active Listening**
  - **Summarising**
  - **Process Stewardship**
  - **Containment**

Here are a few words on each.

11. **Active listening** is one of the hardest skills for managers to practice effectively. At base it involves careful listening (as evidenced by attention and body language) to the other person, without interrupting, without attempting to solve the problem or issue, speaking only when necessary to reflect back what you have heard and so reassure the other person that you have been listening. Managers typically want to solve problems (after all that is what most organisations pay them to do) and so the temptation to assess, judge, appraise, consider options, solve, and implement can be so overwhelming for busy managers that they end up in data gathering mode rather than listening mode.
12. The objective of active listening is actually quite simple. People generally want to be listened to and will open up more if they feel their voice is being heard and their views accepted as valid. If they feel that each comment they make is being scrutinised and challenged they are less likely to be open, or more likely to be defensive or aggressive in their views. Furthermore, if people are genuinely listened to well, they are more likely to listen to themselves more carefully and this can have startling effects on their self awareness and ability to solve their own issues.
13. **Summarising** on a regular basis is one of the most effective facilitative tools. The ability of a manager, in a formal meeting, group discussion, or one to one appraisal/feedback session, to impartially summarise the main issues discussed, the areas of agreement, any outstanding differences etc can both reassure participants and give them fresh focus. The reassurance comes from the fact that the issues have not been lost, that they were taken on board, and that the connections between them have been noticed. The focus comes from a recognition that, if the summary is accurate and acceptable, the discussion can then move on to the next steps. Good summarising can prevent time from being wasted going over the same ground, and can give pace and rhythm to a discussion.
14. **Process Stewardship** sounds more posh and complicated than it is. We have already mentioned that independent facilitators are often brought in to manage the process so that the team itself can concentrate solely on the topic at hand. However there can be times, particularly if the manager has only a small personal interest in a particular solution and simply wants something done, when taking a step back and guiding the process can really help a group or person.
15. As an example, if you want your team to address the issue of rotas, or a new system for booking annual leave, it may be that you don't really have a favoured solution and are quite happy for staff to design something that they will then self

manage. Your best contribution to that task is to think through how to support the process. Think about dividing the time into, say, three sections. The first might be encouraging people to discuss the problems of the current system and what they want from any solution. Your role at this point is to encourage contributions, protect people from too quick a put down or criticism, hold people back from suggesting what the answer might be, and summarising the main points at regular intervals. Section two might be at the same meeting or later, but would involve generating ideas and encouraging mature, respectful discussion about each of them. Again the emphasis is on the process, and personal opinions of the facilitating manager should be kept to a minimum. Section 3 might be to get the group to agree who might go away and work the various ideas into firm proposals for later discussion and agreement.

16. Some of this will look like chairing skills, and of course there are some overlaps. However it is vital that you keep in mind that the focus of facilitation is to keep the issue, the thinking, the decision and the ownership firmly with the person or group at all times. As soon as a group believes that they are being 'facilitated' towards the manager's preferred solution – sometimes described as 'being made to see sense', the managers credibility and honesty is in serious question and accusations of manipulation are difficult to refute.
17. **Containment** is a more advanced facilitation skill and involves the facilitator adopting the perspective or agenda of the person or organisation with whom the team has a problem, and using this stance to challenge the team on its assumptions and arguments. Sometimes known as 'playing devils advocate' it can be an extremely valuable way of containing the team's arguments and emotions in the room and allowing them to be worked through prior to the issues being taken back into the real world.
18. An example of the way in which the manager can use containment behaviour is to invite the group to see them as the person who needs to be persuaded or influenced, thus giving the manager the permission to be deliberately challenging or provocative. It is imperative that the team or individual understands why, and agrees to, the manager taking such a stance otherwise that manager risks being seen as intimidating, unfairly aggressive, or working to a hidden agenda. It is a technique to be used with caution by managers due to this risk of having their motives misunderstood but, selectively applied, it can help a team or individual work through an issue in a safe and contained environment.
19. As you read this, please remember the prime difference between the role of facilitator and the role of manager. The latter is primarily concerned with process and their independence from the team and its issues should prevent them from becoming involved. In contrast the manager's role is to be involved – they would be failing in their responsibilities if they were not deeply involved in an issue and personally affected by its outcome. It is therefore vital that managers never take on the role of pure facilitation, unless it is provided to another part of the organisation with which there is no direct involvement.
20. However, managers can and should incorporate some of the behaviours which facilitators use, as they can help staff think through issues in a way that would be hampered by more traditional management methods. The key is to be clear who owns the problem and what the manager is trying to do. The following quote is somewhat long but is also self explanatory and managers who follow its central theme are likely to be seen as both helpful and developmental in their approach to managing people.

***'At no point whilst I am helping you with this problem will your problem become my problem. For if your problem were to become my problem you would cease to have a problem and I cannot help you if you don't have a problem.'***