



# The Skilled Facilitator Approach

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THE SKILLED FACILITATOR APPROACH is a values-based, systemic approach to group facilitation. It is designed to help groups (1) increase the quality of decisions, (2) increase commitment to decisions, (3) reduce effective implementation time, (4) improve working relationships, (5) improve personal satisfaction in groups, and (6) increase organizational learning. This chapter provides an overview of the approach.

## WHAT IS GROUP FACILITATION?

**Group facilitation** is a process in which a person whose selection is acceptable to all members of the group, who is substantively neutral, and who has no substantive decision-making authority diagnoses and intervenes to help a group improve how it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions, to increase the group's effectiveness.

The facilitator's main task is to help the group increase its effectiveness by improving its process and structure. *Process* refers to how a group works together. It includes how members talk to each other, identify and solve problems, make decisions, and handle conflict. *Structure* refers to stable recurring group processes, such as group membership or group roles. In contrast, *content* refers to what a group is working on—for example, whether to enter a new market, how to provide high-quality service to customers, or what each group member's responsibilities should be. Whenever a group meets, it is possible to observe both its content and process. For example, in a discussion about how to provide high-quality service, suggestions about installing a customer hotline or giving more authority to those with customer contact reflect content. However, members responding to only certain members' ideas or failing to identify their assumptions are facets of the group's process.

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This chapter is adapted from Chapter One, "The Skilled Facilitator Approach," in *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches, New and Revised Edition* by Roger Schwarz (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002). All references to *The Skilled Facilitator* in this *Fieldbook* are to the 2002 edition unless otherwise noted.

Underlying the facilitator's main task is the premise that ineffective group process and structure reduces a group's ability to solve problems and make decisions. By increasing the effectiveness of the group's process and structure, the facilitator helps the group improve its performance and overall effectiveness. The facilitator does not intervene directly in the content of the group's discussions; to do so would require the facilitator to abandon neutrality and would reduce the group's responsibility for solving its problems.

To ensure that the facilitator is trusted by all group members and that the group's autonomy is maintained, the facilitator needs to meet three criteria: (1) be acceptable to all members of the group, (2) be substantively neutral—that is, display no preference for any of the solutions the group considers—and (3) not have substantive decision-making authority. In practice, the facilitator can meet these three criteria only if the facilitator is not a group member. Although a group member may be acceptable to other members and may not have substantive decision-making authority, the group member has a substantive interest in the group's issues.

By definition, a group member cannot formally fill the role of facilitator. Nevertheless, a group leader or member can use the Skilled Facilitator principles and techniques to help a group. Effective leaders regularly use facilitation skills as part of their leadership role.



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## KEY FEATURES OF THE SKILLED FACILITATOR APPROACH

The Skilled Facilitator approach is one approach to facilitation. Often facilitation approaches represent a compilation of techniques and methods without an underlying integrated theoretical framework. The Skilled Facilitator approach is based on a theory of group facilitation that contains a set of core values and principles and a number of techniques and methods derived from the core values and principles. It integrates the theory into practice to create a values-based, systemic approach to group facilitation. In doing so, it answers two key questions: “What do I say and do in this situation?” and “What are concepts and principles that lead me to say and do this?” Exhibit 1.1 identifies the key features of the Skilled Facilitator approach and their purpose.

### The Group Effectiveness Model

To help groups become more effective, you need a model of group effectiveness to guide your work. The model needs to be more than descriptive—that is, it needs to do more than explain how groups typically function or develop because many groups develop in a way that is dysfunctional. To be useful, the model needs to be normative: it should tell you what an effective group looks like.

## Exhibit 1.1 Key Features of the Skilled Facilitator Approach

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- The Group Effectiveness Model
  - A clearly defined facilitative role
  - Useful in a wide range of roles
  - Explicit core values
  - Ground rules for effective groups
  - The diagnosis-intervention cycle
  - Low-level inferences
  - Exploring and changing how we think
  - A process for agreeing on how to work together
  - A systems approach
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The *Group Effectiveness Model* (GEM) identifies the criteria for effective groups, identifies the elements that contribute to effectiveness and the relationships among them, and describes what these elements look like in practice. The model enables you to determine when groups are having problems, identify the causes that generate the problems, and begin to identify where to intervene to address the problems. When you are creating new groups, the model helps you identify the elements and relationships among the elements that need to be in place to ensure an effective group.



See Chapter Two, “The Group Effectiveness Model,” page 15, and Chapter Fifteen, “Using the Group Effectiveness Model,” page 135.

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### A Clearly Defined Facilitative Role

To help groups, you need a clear definition of your facilitative role so that you and the groups you are helping have a common understanding about and agree on the kinds of behaviors that are consistent and inconsistent with your role. This has become more difficult as organizations have used the word *facilitator* to define many different roles. Human resource experts, organization development consultants, trainers, coaches, and even managers have sometimes been referred to as facilitators. The Skilled Facilitator approach clearly defines the facilitator role as a substantively neutral person who is not a group member and who works for the entire group. Still, as I describe in the next section, even if you are not a facilitator, you can use facilitative skills.

The Skilled Facilitator approach distinguishes between two types of facilitation: basic and developmental. In **basic facilitation**, you help a group solve a substantive problem by essentially lending the group your process skills. When your work is complete, the group has solved its substantive problem, but by design, it has not

learned how to improve its process. In **developmental facilitation**, you help a group improve its process by learning to reflect on and change its thinking and behavior so it can solve substantive problems more effectively.

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See Chapter Eleven, “Basic Facilitation,” page 115, and Chapter Forty-Three, “Developmental Facilitation,” page 339.

## Useful in a Wide Range of Roles

Although I have described the Skilled Facilitator approach in terms of a substantively neutral third-party facilitator, the approach also recognizes that everyone needs facilitative skills. So the approach encompasses additional facilitative roles: facilitative consultant, facilitative coach, facilitative trainer, and facilitative leader. All are based on the same underlying core values and principles as the role of neutral, third-party facilitator.



Chapter Three, “Using Facilitative Skills in Different Roles,” page 27, has basic information on the different facilitative roles. Many of the chapters in Parts Six and Seven explore how the different roles work in practice.

## A Note on Terms

*The Skilled Facilitator Fieldbook* focuses on all five of the facilitative roles. When we are writing about a specific role—and only that role—we use the appropriate term, such as *facilitative leader* or *facilitative trainer*. We use the term **Skilled Facilitator approach** to refer specifically to the facilitator role and to using the principles of the approach in any other role.

## Explicit Core Values

All approaches to facilitation are based on some core values, explicit or implicit. Whatever the approach, core values provide its foundation and serve as a guide. They enable you to craft consistent new methods and techniques and to reflect continually on how well you do in acting congruently with them. But if you are to benefit most from a set of core values, they need to be explicit. The Skilled Facilitator approach is based on four explicit core values, and the principles that follow from them: (1) valid information, (2) free and informed choice, (3) internal commitment, and (4) compassion. (The first three core values come from the work of Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, 1974.) *Valid information* means sharing all the relevant information that you have about an issue in a way that others can understand the reasoning. *Free and informed choice* means members make decisions based on valid information, not on pressure from inside or outside the group. *Internal commitment* means each member feels personally responsible for the decision and is willing to support the decision, given his or her role. *Compassion* means adopting a stance toward others and yourself in which you temporarily suspend judgment.

As a facilitator, you need not only a set of methods and techniques but also an understanding of how and why they work. By using an explicit set of core values

and the principles that follow from them, you can improvise and design new methods and techniques consistent with the core values. Without this understanding, you are like a novice baker who must either follow the recipe as given or make changes without knowing what will happen.

Making the core values explicit also helps you work with groups. You can discuss your approach with potential clients so that they can make more informed choices about whether they want to use you as their facilitator. When clients know the core values underlying your approach, they can help you improve your practice, identifying when they believe you are acting inconsistently with the values you espoused. Because the core values for facilitation are also the core values for effective group behavior, when you act consistently with the core values, not only do you act effectively as a facilitator, but you also model effective behavior for the group you are working with.

➤ See Chapter Four, page 33, “Understanding What Guides Your Behavior,” for an introduction to how assumptions and values guide behavior. For some applications, try Chapter Thirty-Four, “Being a Mutual Learner in a Unilaterally Controlling World,” page 287, and Chapter Forty-Four, “Guidelines for Theory-in-Use Interventions,” page 349.

## Ground Rules for Effective Groups

As you watch a group in action, you may intuitively know whether the members’ conversation is productive even if you cannot identify exactly how they either contribute to or hinder the group’s process. Yet a facilitator needs to understand the specific kinds of behaviors that improve a group’s process. The Skilled Facilitator approach describes these behaviors in a set of ground rules for effective groups. The ground rules make specific the abstract core values of facilitation and group effectiveness (Figure 1.1).

➤ See Chapter Five, “Ground Rules for Effective Groups,” page 61, for an introduction to the ground rules. For practical detail on using them, try Chapter Fourteen, “Introducing the Ground Rules and Principles in Your Own Words,” page 131; Chapter Twenty-One, “Ways to Practice the Ground Rules,” page 189; Chapter Twenty-Six, “Ground Rules Without the Mutual Learning Model Are Like Houses Without Foundations,” page 217; and Chapter Thirty-Five, “Introducing the Skilled Facilitator Approach at Work,” page 293.

The behavioral ground rules in the Skilled Facilitator approach differ from the more procedural ground rules that many groups use (“start on time, end on time”; “turn off your pagers and cell phones”). Procedural ground rules can be helpful, but they do not describe the specific behaviors that lead to effective group process.

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## Figure 1.1 Ground Rules for Effective Groups

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- 1** Test assumptions and inferences.
  - 2** Share all relevant information.
  - 3** Use specific examples and agree on what important words mean.
  - 4** Explain your reasoning and intent.
  - 5** Focus on interests, not positions.
  - 6** Combine advocacy and inquiry.
  - 7** Jointly design next steps and ways to test disagreements.
  - 8** Discuss undiscussable issues.
  - 9** Use a decision-making rule that generates the level of commitment needed.
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## The Diagnosis-Intervention Cycle

The group effectiveness model, the core values, and the ground rules for effective groups are all tools for diagnosing behavior in groups. But you still need a way to put these tools to work. Specifically you need to know when to intervene, what kind of intervention to make, how to say it, when to say it, and to whom. To help put these tools into practice, the Skilled Facilitator approach includes a six-step process called the *diagnosis-intervention cycle*. The cycle is a structured and simple way to think about what is happening in the group and then to intervene consistent with the core values. It serves to guide you into effective action.



Chapter Six, “The Diagnosis-Intervention Cycle,” page 69, is an introduction to the diagnosis-intervention cycle. For more on applications, see Chapter Eleven, “Basic Facilitation,” page 115.

## Low-Level Inferences


To help groups become more effective requires that you constantly try to make sense of what is happening in the group. You watch members say and do things and then make inferences about what their behavior means (an ***inference*** is a conclusion you reach about something that is unknown to you based on things that you

have observed) and how it is either helping or hindering the group's process. For example, in a meeting, if you see someone silently folding his arms across his chest, you may infer that he disagrees with what has been said but is not saying so.

The kinds of inferences you make are critical because they guide what you will say and they affect how group members will react to you. To be effective, you need to make these inferences in a way that increases the chance that you will be accurate, enables you to share your inferences with the group to see if they disagree, and does not create defensive reactions in group members when you share your inferences.

The Skilled Facilitator approach accomplishes this by focusing on what I refer to as *low-level inferences*. Essentially, this means that you diagnose and intervene in groups by making the fewest and the smallest inferential leaps necessary.

By learning to think and intervene using low-level inferences, you can increase the accuracy of your diagnosis and your ability to share your thinking with others, and reduce the chance that you will create defensive reactions when you do so. This ensures that your actions increase rather than decrease the group's effectiveness.

 See the *Ladder of Inference* sidebar in Chapter Five, "Ground Rules for Effective Groups," page 61, for an explanation of how we make inferences.

## Exploring and Changing How We Think

Facilitation is difficult work because it is cognitively and emotionally demanding. It is especially difficult when you find yourself in situations you consider potentially embarrassing or psychologically threatening. Research shows that in these situations, most people tend to think and act in a way that seeks to unilaterally control the conversation, win the discussion, and minimize the expression of negative feelings (Argyris and Schön, 1974). The same problem that reduces your effectiveness as a facilitator reduces the effectiveness of the groups you are seeking to help. Like the facilitator, the group members are also unaware of how they create these problems for themselves.

The Skilled Facilitator approach helps you understand the conditions under which you act less effectively and understand how your own thinking leads you to act ineffectively in ways that you are normally unaware of. It provides tools for increasing your effectiveness, particularly in situations you find emotionally difficult. This involves changing not only your techniques, but also how you think about or frame situations, including the core values and assumptions that underlie your approach.

The Skilled Facilitator approach is grounded in a way of thinking and acting calling the *mutual learning model*. In the *mutual learning model*, you think that you have some information and that others have other information; you think that others may see things that you don't just as you may see things that they don't; you consider differences as opportunities for learning rather than opportunities to show the others that they are wrong; and you assume that people are trying to act with integrity given their situations.

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The Skilled Facilitator approach also rests on several key principles: curiosity, transparency, and joint accountability. **Curiosity** about others' views enables you to continue a productive conversation and learn how your ideas and those of others can be integrated. **Transparency** means sharing your reasoning and intent underlying your statements, questions, and actions. It includes sharing with others your strategy for how you are having the conversation with them. **Joint accountability** means that you share responsibility for the current situation, including the consequences it creates. Rather than seek to blame others, you recognize that because you are part of a system, your actions contribute to either maintaining the system or changing it.

Changing your way of thinking is difficult but rewarding work. By doing this work for yourself, you increase your effectiveness. Then you can help groups learn to reflect on and change the ways they think in difficult situations so that they can work more effectively together.



See Chapter Four, "Understanding What Guides Your Behavior," page 33; Chapter Seventeen, "Developing Shared Vision and Values," page 149; Chapter Twenty-Six, "Ground Rules Without the Mutual Learning Model Are Like Houses Without Foundations," page 217; Chapter Forty-Four, "Guidelines for Theory-in-Use Interventions," page 349; Chapter Forty-Five, "Introducing the Core Values and Ground Rules," page 361; Chapter Forty-Six, "From Learning to Lead to Leading to Learn," page 367; Chapter Forty-Seven, "Reflections of a Somewhat Facilitative Leader," page 377; Chapter Fifty-Four, "Using Creative and Survival Cycles to See and Shift Mental Models," page 433; and Chapter Sixty-Two, "Using the Facilitative Leader Approach in Public Office," page 515.

## A Process for Agreeing on How to Work Together

Facilitation involves developing a relationship with a group—a psychological contract in which the group gives you permission to help them because they consider you an expert and trustworthy facilitator. Building this relationship is critical because it is the foundation on which you use your facilitator knowledge and skills; without the foundation, you lose the essential connection with the group that makes your facilitation possible and powerful. To build this relationship, you need a clear understanding and agreement with the group about your role as facilitator and how you will work with the group to help it accomplish its objectives. I have found that many of the facilitation problems my colleagues and I have faced stemmed from a lack of agreement with the group about how the group and facilitator will work together.

The Skilled Facilitator approach includes an explicit process for developing this agreement that enables the facilitator and the group to make an informed free choice about working together. By using this process, you act consistently with your facilitator role and increase the likelihood that you will help a group achieve its goals.



## A Systems Approach

Facilitators often tell me stories of how, despite their best efforts to help a group in a difficult situation, the situation gets worse. Each time the facilitator does something designed to improve things, the situation either deteriorates immediately or temporarily improves before getting even worse. One reason this occurs is that the facilitator is not thinking and acting systemically. The Skilled Facilitator approach recognizes that a group is a **social system**—a collection of parts that interact with each other to function as a whole—and that groups generate their own system dynamics, such as deteriorating trust or continued dependence on the leader. You enter into this system when you help a group. The challenge is to enter the system, complete with its functional and dysfunctional dynamics, and help the group become more effective without becoming influenced by the system to act ineffectively yourself.

The Skilled Facilitator approach recognizes that any action you take affects the group in multiple ways and has short-term and long-term consequences, some of which may not be obvious. The approach helps you understand how your behavior as facilitator interacts with the group’s dynamics to increase or decrease the group’s effectiveness. For example, a facilitator who privately pulls aside a team member she believes is dominating the group may seem to improve the team’s discussion in the short run. But this action may also have several unintended negative consequences. This person may feel that the facilitator is not representing the team’s opinion and may see the facilitator as biased against him, thereby reducing the facilitator’s credibility with that member. Even if the facilitator is reflecting the other team members’ opinions, the team may come increasingly to depend on her to deal with its issues, thereby reducing rather than increasing the team’s ability to function.

Using a systems approach to facilitation has many implications, a number of which are central to understanding the Skilled Facilitator approach. One key implication is treating the entire group as the client rather than only the formal group leader or the member who contacted you. This increases the chance of having the trust and credibility of the entire group, which is essential in serving as an effective facilitator.

A second implication is that effective facilitator behavior and effective group member and leader behavior are the same thing. Taking into account that the facilitator is substantively neutral and not a group member, the Skilled Facilitator approach does not have different sets of rules for the facilitator and group members. A third key implication is that to be effective, your system of facilitation needs to be internally consistent. This means that the way you diagnose and intervene in a

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group and the way you develop agreements with the group all need to be based on a congruent set of principles. Many facilitators develop their approach by borrowing methods and techniques from a variety of sources. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but if the methods and techniques are based on conflicting values or principles, they can undermine the facilitator's effectiveness as well as that of the groups they work with.



*See Chapter Seven, "Thinking and Acting Systemically," page 75; Chapter Twenty-Nine, "Exploring Your Contributions to Problems," page 255; Chapter Forty, "Helping a Team Understand the System They Created," page 323; Chapter Forty-One, "I Can't Use This Approach Unless My Boss Does," page 331; Chapter Forty-Two, "How to Stop Contributing to Your Boss's and Your Own Ineffectiveness," page 335; and Chapter Fifty-Six: "Applying the Skilled Facilitator Approach to a Systems Thinking Analysis," page 447.*

## **INTEGRATING THE SKILLED FACILITATOR APPROACH WITH OTHER PROCESSES**

Facilitators, consultants, and leaders can use the Skilled Facilitator approach with other processes and tools to make the processes and tools more effective. For example, people often use the approach with problem-solving methods, strategic planning processes, and quality improvement tools.

Because the Skilled Facilitator approach is a values-based systems approach, it works well with other approaches that have a compatible value set. For example, using a performance feedback process that prevents the person receiving the feedback from talking with the people who provided it is inconsistent with the Skilled Facilitator core values. It creates a situation in which people can neither assess whether the information is valid nor learn specifically how they might change their behavior. This prevents them from making a free and informed choice about whether to change their behavior and reduces their internal commitment to change. In many cases, it is possible to modify the tool or process to be compatible with the Skilled Facilitator approach.



*See, for example, Chapter Forty-Nine, "360-Degree Feedback and the Skilled Facilitator Approach," page 391; Chapter Fifty, "Implementing a 360-Degree Feedback System," page 403; and Chapter Fifty-One, "Do Surveys Provide Valid Information for Organizational Change?" page 409.*

## **THE EXPERIENCE OF FACILITATION**

Facilitation is challenging work that calls forth a wide range of emotions. Part of this work involves helping group members deal productively with their emotions while they are addressing difficult issues. It is equally important to deal with your

own emotions as facilitator. Because your emotions and how you deal with them profoundly determine your effectiveness, the Skilled Facilitator approach involves understanding how you as a facilitator feel during facilitation and using these feelings productively. For example, you may feel satisfied having helped a group work through a particularly difficult problem or proud to see the group using some of the skills they have learned from you. When the group is feeling confused and uncertain how to proceed in their task, you may be feeling the same way about the facilitation. You may be frustrated by a group's inability to manage conflict even if you have been asked to help the group because they are having problems managing conflict. You may feel sad watching a group act in ways that create the very consequences they are trying to avoid, feel happy that you can identify this dynamic in the group, and feel hopeful seeing that the group's pain is creating motivation for change.

At one time or another I have experienced each of these feelings as a facilitator; they are part of the internal work of facilitation. The Skilled Facilitator approach enables you to become more aware of these feelings and increases your ability to manage them productively—what some refer to as emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). I have found that my ability to develop these emotional skills is both distinct from and related to my larger set of knowledge, skills, and experience as a facilitator. While there are many ways to improve my facilitation skills that do not focus on dealing with my emotions, my use of any of these skills becomes more powerful if I am attuned to my own feelings and others' feelings and deal with them productively.

Through facilitating groups, you can also come to know yourself by reflecting on how you react to certain situations, understanding the sources of your feelings, and learning how to work with your feelings productively. In doing so, you not only help yourself but in turn increase your ability to help the groups with which you work—the people who face the same issues.

## Resource

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