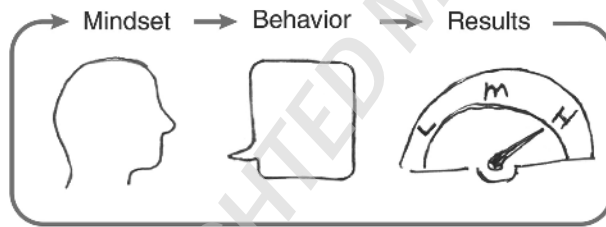
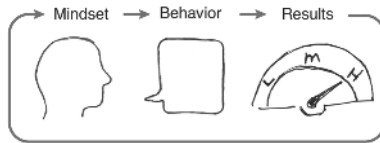


## PART ONE

# THE FOUNDATION







## CHAPTER ONE

# The Skilled Facilitator Approach

**T**his book is about helping groups get better results. If you're reading this, you may be exploring how to or are already working with groups. You may be serving as a facilitator, consultant, coach, or trainer. In any case, you want to develop facilitation skills to help groups become more effective.

## THE NEED FOR GROUP FACILITATION

Groups are the basic work unit in many organizations. Organizations are too complex for individuals alone to have all the information they need to produce products and services, or make key decisions, without creating unintended negative consequences. So, organizations create groups to get all the needed information in the same room, resolve different and conflicting views, and commit to a common course of action. Groups need to work effectively. But if you've worked with groups, you know they're often less than the sum of their parts; they make poor decisions, create mistrust and low commitment, and leave members demotivated and stressed. It doesn't need to be this way. This book will show you how to help groups achieve what they want and need to achieve.

## MOST PEOPLE WHO NEED TO FACILITATE AREN'T FACILITATORS

If you work with groups, you need facilitation skills. Most people who work with groups don't think of themselves as facilitators, and technically, they're not. Essentially, a group facilitator is a content-neutral third party who helps a group

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improve how to work together to get better results. **But even if you're not a facilitator, you can still use the same approach—the mindset and skill set—that facilitators use to help groups get better results.** At its core, facilitation is simply a way of thinking and working with groups that increases the chance that they'll perform well, develop strong working relationships, and maintain or improve members' well-being. It's valuable for any relationship worth your time. If you serve in any of these roles, you'll benefit from facilitation skills:

- **You're an internal or external consultant, providing expert advice to organizations.** You may be an expert in the area of strategy, finance, accounting, IT, HR, marketing, logistics, organizational change, or any number of other areas. Your purpose isn't to facilitate groups, but you need to work with groups to understand your clients' challenges and needs, and propose and implement solutions.
- **You're an internal or external consultant whose purpose is to help groups improve their results by improving their process in some way.** You may specialize in process improvements such as Lean, Six Sigma, value engineering, quality improvement, or other related approaches. You may feel challenged when dealing with problems that stem from the soft side of groups, like resistance to change. Or you may specialize in a key element necessary for effective groups such as managing conflict productively, building trust, increasing diversity, or demonstrating leadership.
- **You're a coach, now working with teams.** You generally work with individuals but increasingly find yourself working with teams. You realize that helping a team requires more skills than working with someone one-on-one.
- **You're a trainer who helps people develop knowledge and/or skills in a group setting.** You need to actively engage people as you meet their learning needs while simultaneously making sure you stay on task and on time.

If you're a member or formal leader of the group you're trying to improve, facilitation skills are also essential for your work. I've written the book *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams* (Jossey-Bass, 2013) for people in your role. It uses exactly the same mindset and skill set I describe in this book, and it includes specific examples to help you in your formal and informal leadership tasks.

## IS THIS BOOK FOR YOU?

This book is for anyone who works with groups to help them get better results. It provides a comprehensive approach to facilitation that you can apply in a variety

of roles. When you've finished reading the book, you'll have answers to the five main questions that anyone who wants to work effectively with groups must address.

### **Should I Be a Facilitator, Consultant, Coach, or Trainer to a Group?**

How do I decide what role to play? What do I do if I need to help the group by using more than one role? You can help a group as a facilitator, consultant, coach, or trainer. Selecting the appropriate facilitative role is important. In each role, you help a group in a different way. The role you select depends on the type of help the group needs. If you select the appropriate role, you help the group achieve its goals. If you select an inappropriate role, you hinder the group and can hamper your working relationship with them.

The Skilled Facilitator approach defines six of these helping roles, describes how you use each role to help the group, and the conditions under which it's the most appropriate role for you to use (Chapter 2). It also explains when and how to move between the roles.

### **What Should I Pay Attention to to Help a Group?**

Do I watch who speaks to whom or how much people speak? What role each member plays in the group? How people state their views and ask questions? How group members with different personality types interact? When you're working with a group, there are so many things you might focus on to figure out what the group is doing that is productive and unproductive. It's not possible to pay attention to everything, so how do you decide what's important to pay attention to and what's not? And how do you do this in real time so that you can respond immediately, instead of figuring it out after the meeting has ended?

When you ask yourself these questions, you're asking for a diagnostic model to guide what you pay attention to and how you make sense of it. The Skilled Facilitator approach uses a multifactor diagnostic model that enables you to identify what is occurring in a group that is increasing or decreasing its effectiveness. The approach describes eight behaviors (Chapters 5 and 10) that you can use each time a group member speaks, to analyze exactly how he or she is making the conversation more or less productive. The approach also describes two mindsets (Chapters 3 and 4) that group members use—one effective and one ineffective—so that you can infer when group members are thinking in ways that lead them to act less effectively.

Finally, the Skilled Facilitator approach includes a Team Effectiveness Model (Chapter 6) that describes how a group or team's design, including its structures and processes, affect its results. Structure includes the group's task and goals, the ways in which group members are interdependent as they accomplish the task, and the roles that group members fill as they work together. Process includes how the group solves problems, makes decisions, and manages

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conflict. By analyzing a group's underlying structures and processes, you identify powerful but invisible forces that affect the group.

The Skilled Facilitator diagnostic model enables you to attend to a range of factors (that is, mindset, behavior, structures, and processes) that make significant differences in the three results that every team needs to achieve: (1) solid performance; (2) strong working relationships; and (3) positive individual well-being.

### **What Do I Say When the Group Isn't Working Effectively?**

When should I intervene with the group? What exactly should I say? Who should I say it to? After you've diagnosed what's happening in a group, you have to decide whether to intervene; that is, whether to share what you're seeing and what you think it means for the group, and see if the group wants to change its behavior. You can't intervene every time you see something that may reduce the group's effectiveness; if you do, the group may not accomplish its work and may lock you out of the room.

When you decide to intervene, you need to decide what kind of intervention to make, exactly what to say, and to whom. To accomplish this, the Skilled Facilitator approach includes a six-step process called the mutual learning cycle (Chapters 7 and 9). The cycle is a structured and simple way for you to think about what's happening in the group and then to intervene effectively. It enables you to intervene on anything that is occurring in the group, including when group members' behavior is ineffective (Chapter 10), when group members are using some process ineffectively (Chapter 11), and when emotional issues arise (Chapter 12).

### **How Do I Develop an Agreement to Work with a Group?**

How do I figure out who my client group is and what kind of help they need? What agreements do I need to make to increase the chance of success, and which group members need to be involved in the agreement? What do I do if group members tell me things they want me to keep confidential? Addressing these questions and many others will enable you to reach an agreement about whether and how you and the group will work together. This is the contracting process, and how well you manage it affects the course of your work with the group. Manage it well and you and the group have created the conditions for an effective working relationship; manage it poorly and unresolved issues will continue to plague your work with them.

The Skilled Facilitator approach provides a five-stage contracting process. It describes the purpose and tasks for each contracting stage, the type of information to obtain and share with the group, the decisions you and the group need to reach, and who needs to be involved at each stage.

## What Do I Do When a Group Is Difficult to Deal With?

How do I work with group members who aren't participating, are openly hostile with each other, or are resisting me? How do I deal with a group leader who is trying to control the facilitation? What do I do when the group is really frustrating me? Being able to effectively address challenging situations—ones in which the stakes and emotions are high and members have very strong and different views—is a sign of a skilled facilitator, consultant, coach, or trainer. That includes situations in which the stakes are high for you, you think you understand the situation and the group doesn't, and you have strong emotions.

**At the heart of the Skilled Facilitator approach is the fundamental and powerful principle that how you think is how you facilitate—or consult, coach, and train.** Although the tools, techniques, and behaviors that you'll learn in this book are necessary and important, ultimately your effectiveness stems from your mindset, the values and assumptions that drive your behavior and ultimately create your results. Even if you have a set of effective tools, techniques, and behaviors, you'll get poor results for yourself and the groups you're helping if you apply them using an ineffective mindset.

Unfortunately, when we find ourselves in challenging situations, almost all of us use the same ineffective mindset—unilateral control (Chapter 3). The specifics may differ for each of us, but when we feel psychologically threatened or embarrassed, research shows that 98 percent of us operate from this. As the name suggests, the core values and assumptions of this approach are designed so we unilaterally control the situation to get the outcome we want. Ironically, the unilateral control mindset leads you to act in ways and get the very results you're trying hard to avoid: lower-quality decisions, mistrust, unproductive conflict, defensive reactions, lack of commitment, strained relationships, decreased motivation, and increased stress.

**The Skilled Facilitator approach operates from a different mindset that research shows is more effective—the mutual learning mindset** (Chapter 4). The mutual learning mindset comprises the core values of transparency, curiosity, informed choice, accountability, and compassion. When you operate from the mutual learning mindset, rather than assuming you understand and are right while others who disagree don't understand and are wrong, you assume that each of us is missing information and that differences are opportunities for learning. You recognize that you may be contributing to the very problems you're complaining about.

Throughout the book, I will help you recognize when you may be operating from a unilateral control mindset and show you how to shift to a mutual learning mindset. My clients consistently tell me this is the most powerful part of the Skilled Facilitator approach—and the most challenging as well. The more you're able to do this, the more you'll be able to help groups, even in the most challenging situations.

## THE SKILLED FACILITATOR APPROACH

The Skilled Facilitator approach is one approach to facilitation. It's an approach I've been developing since 1980, when I began teaching facilitation to others. The Skilled Facilitator approach is based on a theory of group facilitation that is grounded in research on groups. Its elements have been borne out by more than 35 years of research.<sup>1</sup> Here are the main characteristics of the approach.

### It Answers the Questions: What Do I Do? How Do I Do It? Why Do I Do It That Way?

The approach accomplishes this by integrating theory and practice. Knowing what to do and how to do it—the specific behaviors, tools, and techniques—are necessary, but they're not sufficient. If you don't understand why you're doing what you're doing—the underlying principle—you won't be able to spontaneously redesign your behavior when you're faced with a new situation. By understanding the underlying theory and principles, you move from being a novice cook having to dutifully follow a recipe to a creative chef who can use the knowledge of ingredients and cooking chemistry to create any dish from the available ingredients.

### 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. Often this happens because the facilitator isn't thinking and acting systemically.

For example, in your facilitative role, if you privately pull aside a team member whom you assume is dominating the group, in the short term it may seem to improve the group's discussion. But it may also have several unintended negative consequences. The pulled-aside member may feel that you're biased against him, thereby reducing your credibility with that member. If the group doesn't think the member is dominating the conversation, then you've unilaterally acted at odds with the group's needs, which undermines your relationship with the group. Even if you're reflecting the other group members' opinions, talking to the member individually shifts the group's accountability to you and inappropriately increases the group's dependence on you for sharing their views and solving their own problems.

When you *think* systemically, you see the group as a social system—a collection of parts interacting with each other to function as a whole. You understand that although every group is different, because all groups are systems, under the same system conditions they generate predictable system results, such as slow implementation time, deteriorating trust, or continued overdependence on the leader. You can predict what's likely to happen in a group based on how the group is structured and how members are interacting.



When you help a group, you enter into this system. Your challenge is to understand the group's functional and dysfunctional dynamics, and help it become more effective, without becoming influenced by the system to act ineffectively yourself. When you *act* systemically, you recognize that any action you take affects the group and you in multiple ways that have short-term and long-term consequences. Your interventions are more helpful to the group, and you avoid or reduce negative consequences for the group and you.

### All the Parts Fit Together

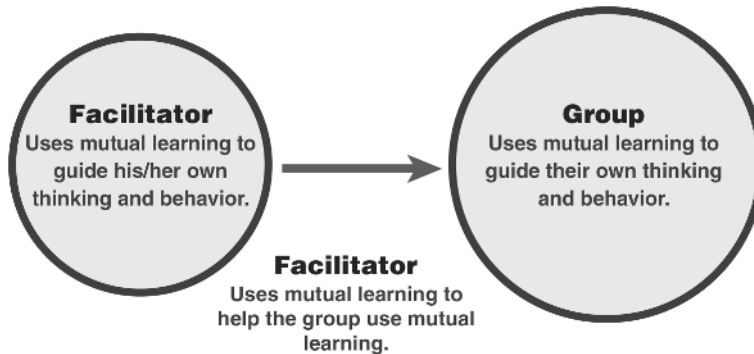
Because the Skilled Facilitator approach is a systemic approach, it takes a comprehensive approach to helping groups—and all the parts fit together. Many facilitators develop their approaches by collecting tools and techniques from a variety of other approaches. There's nothing inherently wrong with this, but if the different tools and techniques are based on conflicting values or assumptions, they can undermine your effectiveness and the groups you're trying to help. For example, if you say that your client is the entire group, yet you automatically agree to individual requests by the group's leader, you may soon find yourself in the middle of a conflict between the group and its leader, rather than helping to facilitate the entire group.

The Skilled Facilitator approach starts with an internally consistent set of mutual learning core values and assumptions. Together they create the mindset upon which all the Skilled Facilitator tools, techniques, and behaviors are based. Consequently, when you use the approach, you're acting congruently. You won't be giving the group mixed messages or otherwise creating problems for the group.

### It's the Same Approach for You and Group Members

One of the things that makes the Skilled Facilitator approach powerful is that, aside from the fact that your facilitative role differs from that of a group member, the approach is the same for you as it is for the groups you're helping. **The Skilled Facilitator approach states that effective facilitators, consultants, coaches, trainers, and group members operate from the same mutual learning mindset and use the same set of behaviors.**

There is no secret set of facilitator tools, techniques, or strategies. I wrote *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams* so leaders and their teams could benefit from the same mutual learning mindset and skill set as facilitators, consultants, coaches, and trainers. If you want the groups you're working with to understand how to get better results by developing a mutual learning mindset and skill set, you can ask them to read *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams*. Not only will it help them become a more effective group, but also they'll better understand how you're using the same mutual learning approach to help them.



**Figure 1.1 Using Mutual Learning Three Ways**

This means that there is a common mindset and skill set, no matter what your role. When you act effectively in your facilitative role, you're modeling effective behavior for leaders and groups. This makes the transfer of learning from you to the group quicker and easier. Consequently, you can use the mutual learning approach in three ways, as Figure 1.1 shows: (1) You can use the mutual learning mindset and skill set as the basis for your thinking and behavior; (2) the group can use the mutual learning mindset and skill set as the basis for their thinking and behavior; and (3) you can use the mutual learning mindset and skill set to diagnose and intervene to help the group get better results using mutual learning.

### **You Can Use the Approach Almost Anywhere**

Although this book is about helping work groups, many of my clients tell me that they use the mindset and behaviors of the Skilled Facilitator approach outside of work, with their families, friends, and community, and see positive results. You can use the approach in almost any situation—in any role—because it's based on principles of effective human interaction. For me, the principles underlying the Skilled Facilitator approach are simply the way I want to be in the world, as a facilitator, consultant, spouse, father, friend, or in any other role.

## **EXPERIENCING THE SKILLED FACILITATOR APPROACH**

My clients consistently tell me that the Skilled Facilitator concepts and tools are easy to understand. And then, after practicing a little, they often add, "But it's harder than it looks." When you read the many verbatim examples I share in the book, you'll probably and reasonably think, *That's not difficult*. After all, the

examples I share use everyday language that you've already mastered, even if you've never combined the words in the way that I have. It's not like you're watching me perform magic and wondering, *How did he do that?*

But it's harder than it looks for several reasons. First, you need to pay attention to many aspects of a group simultaneously. Second, you need to quickly make sense of what you're seeing. To do this efficiently and without feeling overwhelmed, you need instant access to your diagnostic models. Finally, you need to quickly decide what intervention to make with the group. All of this is cognitively challenging.

But here's the most challenging part: When you start to use the approach with real groups, you'll sometimes find it difficult to speak the words you have read in the book and maybe even committed to memory. It's not simply that you haven't learned the phrases; it's that you're dealing with challenging situations—ones that trigger your own unilateral control mindset. You may feel frustrated or annoyed with group members, anxious about conflict within the group, worried about whether you can help the group, or any mix of emotions.

Furthermore, because how you think is how you facilitate, when you're operating from a unilateral control mindset it trumps your ability to use mutual learning behaviors. In short, the most challenging part of facilitation is not the group—it's your mindset and how the group affects it.

I'm telling you this not because I'm trying to dissuade you from reading this book, but to let you know this is normal. All those who use the Skilled Facilitator approach find that their own mindset is the main challenge to their effectiveness—including me.

Now, here's the good news. If you regularly practice the approach and get rigorous feedback, you'll become more effective. You'll be able to operate from the mutual learning mindset more often. When you slip into unilateral control, you'll be able to realize it more quickly and move back to mutual learning more quickly. One of the joys of hearing from readers of *The Skilled Facilitator* and clients who I have taught is that they are much more effective than they used to be and their clients and colleagues tell them that. They also tell me that their effectiveness spills over to other roles in their life because they use the mutual learning approach in general.

## **MAKING THE SKILLED FACILITATOR APPROACH YOUR OWN**

Part of learning the Skilled Facilitator approach is integrating it with your own style—making it your own. Throughout the book, as you read examples of what I would say in various situations, sometimes you may think that the words are natural and make sense; other times, you may think, *This sounds awkward;*

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*I can't imagine myself saying those words.* You're likely to have the same experience as you begin to practice using this approach with groups. This awkward feeling is common, stemming partly from learning a new approach.

But it can also stem from trying to force-fit my style to yours. You can't be me (and I don't assume you would want to). When I was first learning how to use the mutual learning approach in facilitation, I tried hard to imitate Chris Argyris, from whom I learned the approach (he called it Model II) in graduate school at Harvard. As deeply as I respected Chris, our styles were different; I could not intervene exactly as he did and still sound like me. It was not until I found my own voice that the approach became mine. I assume the same is true for you. Learning to use the core values and behaviors is a journey; part of the journey is finding your own voice. Welcome to the journey.

### **SUMMARY**

Most people who need to use facilitation skills aren't facilitators. The Skilled Facilitator approach is an approach for helping groups that you can use as a facilitator, consultant, coach, or trainer. It's a comprehensive, systemic approach that is based on theory and is supported by decades of research. It begins with a set of mutual learning core values and assumptions (called a mindset) that generates tools, techniques, and behaviors, all of which fit together. Together, the mutual learning mindset, the Team Effectiveness Model, the eight mutual learning behaviors, and other tools help you identify what is happening in a group and intervene to help the group increase its effectiveness. The approach enables you to explore and change your mindset, to improve your ability to help groups, even in increasingly difficult situations.