

Becoming a Flexible Facilitator

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One of the facilitation insights most frequently identified in our Igniting Creative Potential Course is the importance of the facilitator maintaining a flexible stance- being ready for the unexpected twists and turns that can occur in sessions.

Experienced facilitators have learned (sometimes painfully) that almost anything can and usually does happen in sessions, meetings or other group interactions that are being facilitated. It comes as no surprise that the facilitator's ability to be ready for and able to deal with the unexpected is crucial to their and the groups success.

This identified need to be flexible seems to focus on two different types of flexibility. The first refers to the facilitators need to be flexible in the use of tools and process.

"Always have a back up tool."

A flexible facilitator understands that tools do not work the same way for every group and having a back up tool ready to switch to is essential even if that tool ends up not being used. It is essential that a facilitator have a thorough knowledge of a variety of both generating and focusing tools so they have the ability to switch when and if needed.

Almost as important as having a variety of tools available is the facilitators knowledge of how to choose the appropriate tool at the right time for the right circumstance. Insights generated in the Facilitator Labs during the Igniting Creative Potential course clearly point to the models for choosing generating and focusing tools as critical to facilitation success.

"Be flexible through the whole process"

The Creative Problem Solving v6.1 framework provides a road map by which the facilitator can guide the group while maintaining a flexible option rich climate for the group to do its work.

"You can plan...plan...plan, but things will not always happen as planned so it is critical that you have a Plan B"

A flexible facilitator understands the importance of having a "Plan B" in mind and also has done the preparation necessary to be ready to implement that "Plan B" should and when it becomes necessary.

The second type of flexibility that Igniting Creative Potential participants point to is the importance of the facilitator's personal flexibility. This suggests a stance of not only being able to recognize the need for the change but also being willing to make the changes as the need occurs.

“You have to roll with the punches/go with the flow”

In sessions that you are facilitating the unexpected will occur. At times the unexpected is positive such as a break through or a significant perspective shift, in these cases we tend to refer to it as serendipity. I have facilitated sessions where the client literally jumps out of their chair saying “that’s it!”

As a facilitator you need to be flexible and prepared to “go with the flow”. In order to take advantage of what has happened you have to be willing and able to abandon or revise your facilitation plan. Sticking to the plan and fighting an idea whose time has come is not the best approach that a facilitator can take. It is a doomed strategy.

More often than not though, the kind of unexpected things that happen in groups are negative and potentially harmful to the progress of the group. Dealing with these “curves” sometimes demands every bit of flexibility that a facilitator can muster. Failure to make the needed change can result in the progress of the group being derailed or result in an outcome that is not the new and novel approach or solution that you were looking for.

“Need to respond when you see a situation needing adapting”

A flexible facilitator is tuned into the nuances, non-verbals and other important signs in a group that suggest that there is a need for change. Clues, sometimes as subtle as a gesture and sometimes as obvious as multiple side conversations or lack of group productivity need to be within the scope of the facilitator’s awareness at all times. There are many elements that play into a facilitator’s ability to recognize and act on these messages. Lines of sight, where the facilitator is positioned in relationship to the group and to the owner of the content (client), what a facilitator focuses on all impact how “tuned in” the facilitator is.

Concerned that as a facilitator you might not be appropriately “tuned in”? Here is a suggestion, the next time that you facilitate a session have a friend or colleague sit in and pay particular attention to what is going on in the group. Afterwards, compare notes and see what you were aware of and what you may have missed. By doing this you can determine how much is happening in the group that you are not picking up on.

Another suggestion is attending the Igniting Creative Potential course which provides insight and practical training in these and other means for the facilitator to build and maintain awareness and flexibility. For more information on the Igniting Creative Potential course and becoming a more flexible facilitator go to

<http://www.cpsb.com/services/icp>