



Understanding the Role of a Facilitator

By Bill Shephard

When people talk or think about the role of a facilitator there are many differing and frequently erroneous perceptions about what that role entails. Some people think of facilitators only as “super time keepers” handling the task of keeping the meeting or session moving forward in a timely manner. Others see them as “flip chart secretaries” responsible for recording the information and keeping track of everything that results from the meeting, perhaps even transcribing it. Some people seek out a facilitator because they are looking for a sideline cheerleader as support or someone to do the meeting planning or manage the logistics. Perceptions like this are a result of a misunderstanding or lack of understanding about the essential role of facilitator.

So what is a more productive way to view the role of facilitator?

An important first step in gaining this more productive viewpoint, is to understand that facilitation is a type of leadership. In the book “Facilitative Leadership” Scott Isaksen describes facilitation as process-oriented leadership that involves interactions between two or more people.

We call it process-oriented leadership because facilitation is, in part, about understanding, planning and managing process. Process is the “how we are going to do the work” as opposed to “what we are going to work on” which is the content. Within the context of facilitating the Creative Problem Solving (CPS), process includes more than just applying tools. It deals with the overall issues of appraising the task to understand the situation well enough to determine the appropriateness of CPS and the kind and amount of novelty needed. In their role as process leaders, facilitators are engaged in making decisions about what process component and stage to enter as well as the tools that are appropriate for the task and the group at hand. Facilitation is about taking a leadership role in process and leaving the leadership of content to the individual or group that owns the content (the client). We like to say that the facilitator takes control of the process so the client and the group have the luxury of being 100% in content.

Frequently our problem-solving efforts involve interaction between two or more people. Even in circumstances where a facilitator is one-on-one with the owner of the challenge there are two people involved. Facilitators help to unleash the creative potential in people through believing in the innate

creativity of each individual as well as expecting and encouraging the best in people. Managing the environment of the group so that each individual is able to contribute their best is the responsibility of the facilitative leader. This requires a knowledge and understanding of how people differ when they are involved in solving problems and managing change along with an ability to be flexible. For more on Being a Flexible Facilitator go to www.cpsb.com/research/communique/featured-articles/Becoming-a-Flexible-Facilitator.html

As you can see the role of facilitator is much more than flip chart secretary or logistics coordinator. So the next time someone says "I think that we should get a facilitator" or you are asked to be a facilitator for someone's group, it is a good idea to explore exactly what role they are looking for that person to play. It is also a great opportunity for you to help set productive expectations about that role and the value that a facilitator can add.

To learn more about what a facilitator must know, do and believe as well as more about process leadership, consider attending the Igniting Creative Potential-

A Focus on Facilitation Course Oct. 7-9, 2008. For more information go to www.cpsb.com/services/creative-capacity/icp