

USING FACILITATION TO DRIVE CHANGE – THE CHANGE LEADER’S GUIDE

In late 2006, Anders, European head of a large construction chemicals business had a problem. Revenues across southern Europe were unacceptable and sliding. His team was fighting about whom and what was to blame and the solutions focused on quick fixes. But Anders believed the problem ran deeper. “We have a systemic problem in southern Europe. Turning things around will require more radical solutions and change from everyone. We need people working together, coordinating better... and soon.”

Anders wanted to use facilitated workshops to build a new strategy for southern Europe. But he had a big question. Would it pay off? Would he get a better strategy and more organizational buy-in from a facilitated process? He knew he might, but a couple of times earlier in his career he’d seen facilitation go horribly wrong too, cementing opposition to change amongst staff and destroying organizational morale.

He’d been introduced to some professional facilitators and they all talked a good story, but how could he know if they were any good? If they weren’t up to managing real conflict, the tensions in the team would grow.

Anders is not alone. His situation is not uncommon. Possibly you have had a similar experience, similar doubts. Like you, he knew that only 30% of strategic change initiatives are fully or mostly successful¹. And often that is because people fail to change or fail to agree on the changes to be made. Like most

successful change leaders, Anders knew facilitation can help people to build commitment to change within organizations and teams². But only if used correctly.

This article will help you to become a more sophisticated user of facilitation – to know what questions to ask facilitators before you hire them; to know how to judge the quality of a facilitator’s work; to know what you, the change leader, need to do to ensure that decisions reached by facilitated groups get implemented.

Facilitating Groups to Drive Change: What is it and when to use it?

Facilitation is about engaging groups to develop shared solutions to problems. Facilitation helps individuals and groups to revisit the values and beliefs that have guided their past decision-making and actions, and so enables them to develop new ideas about what is important and how issues are interrelated. By revisiting situations, problems and opportunities from new perspectives, groups begin to interpret them differently and so change how they act in response to those issues.

While individual changes in beliefs are difficult to achieve, changes in collective beliefs (“shared mental models”) are even harder. This is because shared mental models are embedded in individual and organizational routines and practices that are learned over time.



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“Empirical research findings: A facilitator needs to be an expert in process guidance and have knowledge of relevant frameworks.”

They are socially legitimized and act as barriers to change. In these situations of low perceived urgency and low organizational readiness, it is hard for change leaders to persuade the organization to develop a shared mental model of why and how to change. It is in this context that group facilitation can act as a powerful means to unlock a higher performance potential.

Like any other method, facilitation has its limitations. Facilitators can help groups to find new solutions and build momentum for change **only** if the group has the authority to implement the changes it proposes and if the participants and key stakeholders are open to consider change.

Any facilitation event is a three-stage process – planning, delivery and post-event follow-up and implementation.

Planning – Choosing the right facilitator

Strong facilitators enable the group to reflect more deeply on more complex issues by maintaining group effectiveness and engagement in the face of conflict, uncertainty and complexity. Skilled and competent facilitators expect not only to support the meeting process but also to be actively involved in your change initiative before and after events. When hiring facilitators consider their previous facilitation experience and their knowledge of the subject area under discussion. The subject area is important as the facilitator will have to be able to select and use analysis tools appropriate to the group task. For example, a facilitator experienced exclusively in manufacturing process re-design might lack the tools to assist a group working to

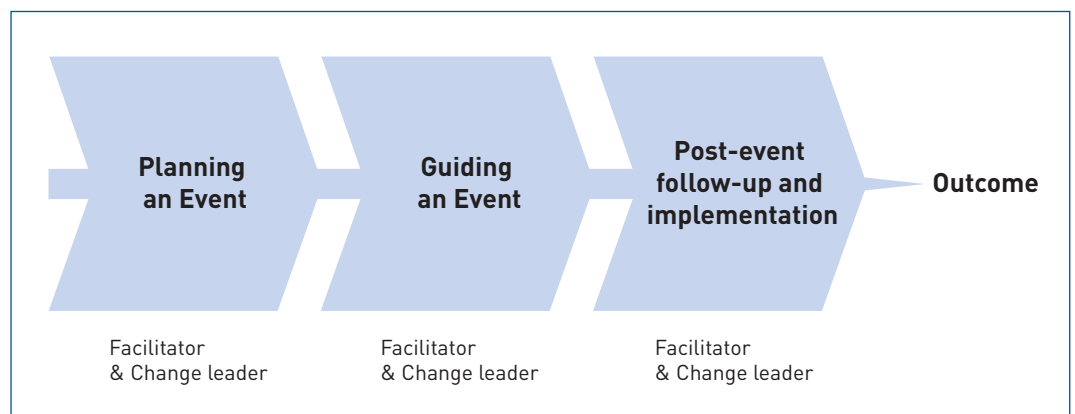
develop growth alternatives. Equally important is the facilitator’s experience in engaging with stakeholders prior to the event and managing conflict within the conflict during the event. In many events, a crisis moment emerges and the role of the facilitator to steer the process is key in order to have “real” conversations that discuss the difficult, hidden issues.

Planning the event itself

When planning any facilitation event it is essential to ensure the agenda is relevant to the group, the organization and the task. To design an effective facilitation process, the facilitator needs a clear understanding of the organizational context of the change initiative and problems to be worked on by the group. The change leader helps the facilitator by creating boundaries which guide the group’s work – and which stop groups from descending into unproductive conflict and ineffective behaviors when working together. Prior to an event, the change leader has to help the facilitator understand the values and beliefs common within the organization and how people are rewarded for their work as well as any problems that may exist as a result of the organization set-up. This also means understanding the views of all relevant stakeholders on what an “acceptable” outcome to the facilitated event could be.

During the event, the facilitator will be using analytical tools and group activities to help the group engage in two essential processes:

- *Framing* – considering alternative ‘frames’ or interpretations of situations;



The change leader plays an important role in helping the facilitator understand the wider context when planning an event

- *Conflict engagement* – challenging existing mental models and developing new shared mental models within the group.

Framing and conflict engagement are used to encourage groups to go through the processes of inquiry (exploring new ideas) and advocacy (proposing new interpretations of situations) and to explore differences in values, beliefs and behaviors. Therefore in evaluating the design of a facilitation agenda, the change leader should be asking four key questions:

- Does each activity within the agenda build logically towards problem solving and solution design?
- What is the purpose of each activity in the agenda – is it to promote inquiry or to promote advocacy? In other words, is it to question existing beliefs or to build new understanding of the issues or to help the group to reach conclusions and decisions?
- Will the group have adequate information and knowledge to complete each activity? If not, how can it be given access to the expertise it needs?
- Is there adequate neutrality and objectivity in the selection and analysis of agenda items – ensuring that balanced information and analysis tools are provided to the group which will not unduly favor particular stakeholders?

Guiding an event

In many facilitation events, major conflicts or perceived crises will lead the group to explore hidden conflicts. Here the role of the facilitator is to engage the group to deal with the conflicts productively. If the change leader is present then he/she has to trust the facilitator to make the choices of how to structure the process to lead towards an agreed upon solution the group feels they own. If the change leader is not present, then his/her role is to demonstrate support for their work – getting them access to the people and resources they need. Later, he/she needs to meet the group to hear their progress and recommendations and finally celebrate the group’s success. The third main task is to close the facilitation event by setting a strong foundation for successful implementation.

If the change leader was not present during the event, this involves meeting the group to hear their recommendations, listening to the group’s reasoning and their wider discoveries of the organization and celebrating success. If the change leader was present, then he/she has to actively push the implementation agenda forward and it becomes her main responsibility.

Post-event follow-up and implementation

Follow-up and implementation is the essential step where many facilitated change solutions falter. The responsibility for follow-up and implementation after facilitation events lies squarely with the change leader.

Before a facilitated event ends, facilitators must ensure groups produce an implementation roadmap of the decisions reached, including a stakeholder engagement plan. Change leaders must role model and reinforce the organizational disciplines that ensure decisions are translated into action and real, measurable outcomes.

Recognizing and overcoming barriers to implementation

There are many reasons why great decisions taken during a facilitation event may not be successfully implemented. Maybe you will recognize some of them? Most organizations encounter these barriers at one time or another. Lack of clarity is often a problem not due to a lack of decisions, but the fact that the decisions are ambiguous. Even if the group has developed a change plan, it may not be crisp or tangible enough to be communicated downwards within the organization. In some companies discipline is not on the agenda. Once a course of action has been decided, there appears to be no necessity for managers to follow it through. Of course the most frequent reason that lack of discipline becomes an endemic part of the culture is that there are no consequences. Lack of accountability can be a result of large organizations where there are places to hide, so if you play your cards right, people will not suspect that in fact you are not doing very much. All three of these barriers can be addressed by developing an implementation plan.

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Developing an implementation map³ is necessary to ensure impact

Developing an implementation map starts during the facilitation event but is an on-going process that continues post-event. During the event, decisions may have been taken, but without an understanding of what their implementation will actually look like, the prospects for implementation are low. Five specific steps need to be taken to overcome the three barriers to implementation – lack of clarity, discipline and accountability – and to improve the chances that the decisions reached during the facilitated event will happen. They are: 1) documenting the decisions made, 2) developing action plans, 3) getting buy-in from stakeholders, 4) ensuring follow-up within the group and 5) rewarding individuals for their contributions.

Many groups think that, having developed an action plan, they are ready to execute it. To a lesser or greater extent, they will, however, need to enlist stakeholders both inside and also potentially outside the organization. Getting people involved will take time and energy and must not be done haphazardly. To make sure that you get the right people involved and committed, the group needs to create an engagement plan. To do this, you must conduct a stakeholder analysis to assess the key people and departments affected by the decisions to be implemented – and then plan how to win their commitment and overcome (or disable) their resistance to change. Finally, to stand any chance of success, formal mechanisms of follow-up need to be planned and organized. In addition, personal performance objectives need to be aligned with the implementation action plans and transparent rewards (financial and non-financial) agreed for measurable deliverables.

Learning from the event

To fully assess the impact of a facilitated event, change leaders, participants and facilitators need to take a step back and reflect upon it. This reflection is of value to the change leader because it will not only lead to learning to improve future events but it can also positively affect the effectiveness of the group, particularly if they will also be responsible for the change implementation.

This article is based on a new book by Professor Büchel and Ivan Moss: «Facilitating Groups to Drive Change». The book further explores the principles underlying effective use of facilitation and will help you to increase the probability of success of each change initiative you drive

¹ Organizing for successful change management: A McKinsey Global Survey, July 2006.

² Engaging people at various levels in the organization is one of the key success factors in transforming organizations; Organizing for successful change management: A McKinsey Global Survey, July 2006.

³ Some of the specific steps are part of what needs to happen to ensure successful execution of strategic initiatives. Ideas for the implementation map in this book are outlined in a more thorough fashion in the book by Gilbert, X., Büchel, B. and Davidson, R. (2007) *Smarter Execution*, Financial Times-Prentice Hall.

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