



FACILITATING GROUPS TO DRIVE CHANGE

Overcoming obstacles to moving forward

By Professor Bettina Büchel - September, 2008

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Perhaps you are in a situation where revenues are falling, profits are also on the red path and you have a team that is blaming each other for who is responsible for this. You have tried to really work with this team on your own to come up with a decision about how to move forward, but with little success. An option here could be facilitation.

Facilitation and the Facilitator

In order for facilitation to be effective, you will need a facilitator that is substantively neutral and unbiased. One who works with a group to diagnose the problem, help come up with a solution, and at the same time improves group effectiveness. A facilitator needs to be able to guide a process within a group and resolve conflicts within that group. In many cases, there are going to be different beliefs about what is the best way forward and this may cause problems leading to group members disagreeing or blaming each other. These differences will have to be exposed if the group is to reach what could be called a “shared mental model” about how to drive the organization forward strategically.

An important part of facilitation is knowledge about guiding the process, and what will happen in the intervention of the group. Facilitation is much more about process guidance rather than content guidance. To some degree, content expertise may matter, because say, you are talking about driving strategy but you have only expertise in procurement, then there may be some difficulty when providing frameworks to the group to help them see the opportunities in a different way.

You need to frame a shared mental model for the group if the organization is to move forward. So providing frameworks will be an important part of facilitation too. However, it is more important that the facilitator understands which frameworks to analyze for the industry than necessarily the industry itself.

The Facilitator and the Change Leader

If you think of facilitation as an intervention within a group, then it is essentially about the facilitator and the change leader working together to be able to help the group develop this shared model based upon which an action plan would then be implemented. Prior to any intervention, the two would have to work closely together because the facilitator would have to understand the group and organizational context.

What is required from this intervention?; is the group an intact team of individuals or one just put together essentially for developing a solution and a proposal to a solution?; how ready is the wider organization for a new strategic direction? Receiving input from the change leader, as well as group members, prior to any intervention will help the facilitator understand these issues better.

During an event it is basically the role of the facilitator to drive the group; but then the change leader needs to take charge again and be the person driving and implementing this change.

Managing Conflict

There are perhaps two distinguishable types of conflict: the productive and the destructive.

Productive conflicts are almost a necessary part of a facilitation workshop, where differences of value are acknowledged and the causes of these are explicitly addressed.

Destructive conflicts occur when hidden assumptions are filed in the closet, when participants' causes of disagreement are disguised, when group members jump from one topic to the next in order to avoid that the real issue is discussed. This is to some degree a judgement call on the part of the facilitator – "Is this now productive, and is this now destructive?"

If the group is relatively silent with lots of nodding heads then the fundamental issues may not all be on the table. Therefore, the facilitator may need to dig a little deeper, push a little further, to make sure that everything is in the open while harboring good resolution skills at the same time.

It is only when decisions can be documented as a result of a shared mental model, implications can be firmed up in terms of action plans and there are no real disagreements, that the group can proceed.

Facilitation to Execution

It is when it comes to execution that most groups tend to fall down in the facilitation process. Having reached an agreement about what is going to be done, there are then some important execution questions to consider. Are the best people involved? Have we mentally thought through the implications of the implementation? Do we have the capabilities to actually make it happen – both financial as well as people's time? Do we have a communication plan in place? Are we going step-wise or is it a one-go rollout? Have we thought about doing pilots to do some initial wins? How are we thinking about the follow-through? Whose role is it to follow through?

The behavioral dimension is an important part also, because it keeps the energy up throughout the execution. Therefore, it is not just about the solution itself, but how everyone interacted as a team and what behaviors should be kept or developed further.

So, energy and commitment throughout is a necessary part of the execution. Being able to finally follow through with execution will facilitate a successful implementation for your organization. Therefore, facilitation could be an essential intervention that brings the group together in driving the organization for change.

Professor Buechel is Director of the Strategic Leadership for Women (SL) and the Orchestrating Winning Performance (OWP) programs. This article is based on a chapter from the OWP 2008 book "Riding the winds of global change", to be published in September 2008.

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