

**A Guide to Facilitation:** by Liz Ollier and Shirley Williams

### **Why have we produced this guide?**

This guide has been produced to assist people who are contemplating commissioning facilitation of a planned event. It is not a “marketing” tool, but is an attempt to ensure that you get the best result from any investment you make in facilitation. We know from experience as facilitators that clients don’t always get the best value for their money because of a lack of understanding about how best to use this resource.

### **When is facilitation useful?**

Facilitation is useful if an event is planned which needs managing tightly to get an agreed output or outcome.

### **What is the role of the facilitator?**

The role of a facilitator is to manage a process in such a way as to achieve his/her client's agenda. The facilitator has no personal agenda. Neither does s/he have anything personally to gain from the output of the meeting.

### **What is the relationship between the facilitator and the client**

An open, honest and supportive relationship between the facilitator and the client is essential. If the client has confidence in the facilitator s/he can relax in the knowledge that the process of the event will be effectively managed.

This transfer of responsibility for the process of running the event, enables the client to become a member of the group and to concentrate on making his/her own contribution to the discussions, in the knowledge that the facilitator will ensure that the client does not move into a dominant position and thereby inhibit free discussion.

Because the role of the facilitator is solely to manage the process and not contribute to the discussion of the content of the meeting, s/he makes no value judgement about the appropriateness or suitability or otherwise of any views expressed, neither does s/he seek to influence the direction of the discussions. S/he does however control the discussion within the scope of the agreed agenda and does not allow any extraneous material to be introduced or allow any more forceful member of the group to hijack the agenda for his/her personal purposes. Throughout, the facilitator will defer to the client and will ensure that the discussion moves forward systematically in a way which achieves the clients's objectives.

Because the facilitator has not been socialised by any formal or informal hierarchy in the group, s/he is able to achieve more equal contribution from all its members and to accord more equal value to the views of all.

Having the facilitator, as opposed to the client, in the leadership role with regard to the process, enables all participants to contribute more freely to the discussions

Once participants experience this truly non judgemental element, they gain the confidence to express views which, in previous meetings, they may have felt would not have been accorded respect or indeed may have feared would damage their standing in the eyes of the other participants. Thus the sum of the views expressed is more likely to contain all options including

those which have previously not been openly aired. The client benefits from hearing views of which s/he had previously been unaware, and from hearing of previously hidden tensions and anxieties. It is the facilitator's responsibility to deal with any issues of conflict in the group or inappropriate behaviour on the part of any participant.

Effective facilitation starts with the planning stage of the meeting/event and this should involve the facilitator working with the client. The role of the facilitator in the planning phase is to introduce external rigour into the thinking of the client, beginning with helping to achieve clarity about the purpose of the meeting/ event.

The facilitator can add huge value by being engaged with the client in designing the agenda, agreeing the time available and the range of strategies which could be adopted to manage the process to achieve it.

Once the client is clear what s/he wants to achieve and who s/he wants to involve, it might be appropriate for the facilitator to check with proposed participants that their ambitions for the meeting align with those of the client. (Some facilitators do that on the day; we do not recommend this)

### **What competencies does a Facilitator bring?**

The facilitator is skilled in group work and therefore able to manage the dynamics in such a way as to get maximum value from all the participants. This involves managing the process including timekeeping, following the agreed agenda, encouraging reticent participants to engage, not allowing strong participants to dominate

Effective Facilitators have excellent listening skills and the ability to paraphrase/ summarise. They are also respectful and sensitive to diversity including any local cultural context (e.g. the need to allow time for prayer, acceptability of adjacent seating for men and women)

### **Recognising the different sorts of meetings/ workshops**

In planning an event it is essential for the client, the facilitator and the participants to be clear about the purpose. This might be

- information sharing;
- brainstorming and capturing of ideas;
- engaging participants in action planning following decisions made at a higher level;
- team planning
- retrospective review of strategy and agreeing actions in response;
- brainstorming and achieving agreement on onward priorities.

## Responsibilities

	Responsibilities of the Client	Joint Responsibilities	Responsibilities of the Facilitator
<b>Preparation</b>			
Identifying a facilitator.	The client needs to be clear about the extent of work required and whether contextual knowledge is required in addition to facilitation skills.		The facilitator needs ensure that there is clarity about the respective roles of the client and the facilitator (this document may assist).
Agreeing the purpose of the event.		Clarity is needed as to the exact purpose of the event.	To provide constructive challenge to ensure the best outcome
Agreeing the ground rules.		<p>Ground rules including issues of confidentiality and dissemination need to be agreed in advance. (many meetings use “ Chatham House” rules concerning dissemination of content and attribution to encourage open discussion in a safe environment). Other ground rules cover issues including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extent of absence tolerated.</li> <li>• Will the deliberations be recorded, if so by whom.</li> <li>• Will there be a post meeting report and action plan circulated, if so by whom and to whom.</li> <li>• Are decisions made at the meeting binding.</li> <li>• Will people be held to account for delivering their element of any action plan agreed.</li> </ul>	
Agreeing the number of people to be involved.		This will depend considerably on the purpose of the meeting; for example, there is good evidence that the maximum number of people to achieve full contribution to a decision making group and to own the decisions taken is no more than 15.	To guide the client on the optimum size of group and the appropriate activities with the agreed group size (e.g. that a plenary will not work with a group of 40).

Agreeing who should be involved.	To ensure that key players are included. Briefing the facilitator on the background of the group.	Identifying the proposed participants and the rationale for the inclusion of each.	
Agreeing the product of the event.		Identifying what product needs to be achieved e.g. a list of captured ideas or a plan of action agreed by all participants (including responsibilities, accountabilities and timescale).	
Agreeing the agenda.		Agreeing the agenda; the content and the length of time which will be accorded to each item; the product required from each item.	Guiding the client on what is realistic and achievable.
Agreeing the logistics.		Consideration needs to be given to room layout (round table, horseshoe, theatre or café style) The facilitator can advise on the most appropriate given group size and the nature of the meeting. Refreshments, registration, materials etc. all need to be pre-planned and agreement needs to be reached on any additional equipment...white boards/ flip charts etc.	Guiding the client on what is likely to make the event most successful.
Agreeing the review points..		The facilitator and client also agree the review points available during the meeting, often at lunch or coffee breaks where the client will provide feedback to the facilitator and refocus the event if necessary.	
Pre-event communication	Pre-meeting communication to all participants about the purpose of the meeting, the rationale for their inclusion in it, the ground rules to be adopted and an agenda with times and venue. Any background reading should be circulated at this stage and never on the day.		

<b>Delivery</b>			
Opening the event.	The client is responsible for opening the event and reminding participants of its purpose.		
Delivering the agreed agenda.			The facilitator runs the event. This will start with the facilitator communicating the pre-agreed ground rules.
Closing the event.	The client is responsible for closing the event including reminding participants of the actions agreed and the process by which they will be put in place.		
<b>Follow up</b>			
Communicating the product.	The client should disseminate any documentation/ summaries etc.	Clarity is needed in advance as to how the product will be documented, by whom and in what form. Furthermore, agreement is needed on the circulation of the document.	Whilst some facilitators will document events this is unusual and if ownership is required it is better for participants to write up the product. The facilitator will provide completed notes, flip charts etc.
		It can be helpful for the client to hold a follow up meeting with the facilitator to review the event and the product achieved.	

## **Tools and Processes**

### **Balancing activities for variety and interest**

It is important to plan a variety of activities to keep participants interest. The facilitator will observe participants at all times for signs of disengagement, frustration etc. and, if necessary, propose an adjustment to the programme to the client at an agreed review point.

### **Presentations**

If presentations are to be used for example to report key points from pre-meetings, to share information, decisions/ strategy from a higher level. The presenter must be an expert in the content presented. Presentations should be concise, no longer than 10-15 minutes in total and should focus on key issues material to the aim of the event.

### **Breakout small groups**

Breakout small groups can be used for brainstorming only. Agreement needs to be reached in advance on processes (i.e. group composition, how they will be chaired, whether a rapporteur is provided, information collected, report back mechanisms etc.)

### **The use of a Rapporteur**

A rapporteur(s) may be useful in the following circumstances:-

- If break out groups are needed because the number of participants exceeds 15
- If the purpose of the meeting is purely to brainstorm and capture ideas
- If the purpose is consultation and obtaining feedback (i.e. not decision making)

In larger groups it may be useful for pre-meetings to be held. Rapporteurs at the main event would report key points from these pre-meetings. The role of the rapporteur in a pre-meeting or break out group is to capture views and discussion accurately and fully and to report them succinctly to the main event.

### **Plenary**

If the number of participants does not exceed 15, then the whole event can be run as a single group. In a larger group discussions may take place in breakout groups, with plenaries being used for feedback. The facilitator will exercise strict control focussing on key points only and allowing no repetition of previous material. For events focussing on brainstorming, alternative methods may be used (posters for display, key points on cards / post its etc.) the facilitator may take photos of these as they are produced to ensure that material is not lost.

### **Documentation**

It is important that the group have ownership of the product. Ideally this means that agreement needs to be reached and documented as the event goes along. It may be possible to do this using a laptop and screen thus producing a draft document as a small group. Alternatively the facilitator will summarise and reflect back decisions or key points made before recording them on flip chart or white board. The final document however should be owned and produced by the client (drawing on material provided by the facilitator).

## **Environment and logistics**

External venues are most likely to stop participants “wandering off”. If a venue in a home office is used it will be important to agree the ground rules about participants absencing themselves. The client needs to set an example in this!! The room needs to be set out in a way which will enable all participants to engage in discussion.

Additional administrative support will be needed for large events to undertake registration, liaise with catering staff, provide additional documentation etc., etc.

The facilitator will control time spent in breaks (as agreed on the agenda) It is essential that the venue team produce meals etc. at the agreed times. Carbohydrate heavy lunches make participation harder in the afternoon! In general, light buffet lunches in or near the event location (i.e. not in a remote dining room) work best

In general, video conference links only work with a small group where all participants, including the remote ones, know each other well. In general, participation by audio link alone does not work well as the remote participant finds it hard to intervene.