

KM4Dev Community Note: The Heaven and Hell of Facilitation

Nancy White and Lucie Lamoureux

Two experienced facilitators take you on a brief tour of the ðheaven and hellö of facilitation, where they look at what can go well and what can go wrong in the practice from start to finish, and suggest a few tips to address the pitfalls, or how to avoid them altogether.

Keywords: facilitation; dos and donts; humour; facilitator

Introduction

Facilitation is a thread that runs through the fabric of knowledge management. Some would argue that facilitation is an essential skill in knowledge management because knowledge is most easily transferred through conversation, either face-to-face or electronically. As KM professionals, we facilitate everything from small meetings to workshops, from simple after-action reviews to more complex knowledge sharing processes.

The beauty of being a facilitator is that the learning never ends; no matter how many sessions or processes youøve facilitated, you learn something new every time. Each time the context, situation and group dynamic is different. Something that worked brilliantly with a group today can fail resoundingly tomorrow. So while we can point to idealized definitions of what a facilitator does, it can also be useful to share the reality.

In February of 2014, an interesting thread came up on the KM4Dev discussion list about facilitation. There were some great definitions of the role of a facilitator, but a second angle emerged, the reality check of what it really means to facilitate in a KM context. We thought weød amplify on what Nancy White originally posted and share - with a bit of humor - the ðheaven and hellö of facilitation. Phillip Grunewald, who posted the original question (ðDefine Facilitatorö), drafted a summary of the thread, which was posted to the KM4Dev Dgroup on March 5, 2014: <https://dgroups.org/groups/km4dev-/discussions/845cqrh7> (accessed 21 November 2014).

According to Sam Kaner, et al. of *The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making*, the facilitator's job is to support everyone to do their best thinking. We add *doing* to that as well! Facilitation - if well done - helps ensure a group's success. If a meeting is really successful, participants have been supported on a journey to an end goal so seamlessly that they don't realize the extent of the work that has been done in the design, planning and steering of the process.

At times it can feel like facilitation is some sort of magic. It can also be a nightmare. The facilitator is usually blamed for the failure. That may be the case, either because of flawed planning, context-specific or cultural misunderstandings, power issues, or serious missteps in the facilitation practice (or all of the above). Or it could be due to a lack of coherence between the sponsor, facilitator and participants.

Facilitation is clearly not magic. The practice has its strong and weak points. So let us take you on a brief tour of the *heaven and hell* of facilitation, where we'll look at what can go wrong from start to finish, and suggest a few tips to address the pitfalls, or how to steer clear of them.

Planning/Contracting

Remember that word *magic*? Well, it usually the result of clear planning and *contracting* between a meeting sponsor and the facilitator. The sponsor may be a single person (*the boss!*) or a planning committee (i.e. the *herd of cats!*). *Contract* means building agreements on the meeting goals, outcomes and outputs as well as the meeting design. It can be very light and simple, or go into details about who is responsible for what, who makes decisions, etc. Let's look at some examples where things can go wrong, and some tips to avoid problems.

Problem	Options/Tips
The sponsor isn't clear on the purpose of the meeting (and of each individual session) and the expectations are also vague.	Clarify, clarify, clarify. Ask questions. Ask more questions and write down the purpose and expectations. Get the sponsor and all the organizers to agree and build the event from this purposeful base. From there you can clarify roles and responsibilities.

	<p>Side tip: if there are more goals and content than can be accomplished in the allotted time, raise this issue early. Ask your sponsor to prioritise.</p>
<p>The facilitator is called in after everything is really messed up. Variation: The facilitator is asked to facilitate, but not included in design of a (really bad) agenda.</p>	<p>Either accept this only if you know the designer was brilliant, or if you can propose modifications for a better agenda/process. If you feel uneasy about it, don't do it! For the future, build relationships with people who may become your client in the future so they'll call you sooner! See the next item.</p>
<p>The facilitator is not briefed on the deeper, real and often problematic issues ("Oh, this is a fantastic group.") Right!</p>	<p>To avoid stepping into a minefield, make sure to develop a good set of questions to ask sponsor(s) to help discern the issues. And make sure to probe deeper if some of the answers sound vague or dismissive. For example, you might ask if there will be people in the room who are opposed to the proposed work or process. Ask if the results of a meeting will be acted upon, by whom and by when. This helps discern if this is just a "check the box consultation" processes.</p>
<p>Facilitation is not an understood, appreciated, or integral practice of the organization.</p>	<p>There are other options beyond hiring an external facilitator. Facilitation skills should be looked at when hiring staff and facilitation capacities should also be developed by organizations. This should not always be an outside job, unless it's necessary for internal reasons. Let's co-source, not outsource!</p>

Power and culture

Regardless of our ideals (or idealism), in every group we run into power differentials. We have organizational hierarchy, culture differences, race and gender issues, be they overt or unconscious. Facilitators themselves can fall into power traps, thinking they are the most important person in the room, or be unconscious of the power dynamics around them. So heaven is when we start with self-awareness and we can discuss power issues with our sponsors and participants. This is not about solving everything that is not

realistic. This is about working with the power issues in each context. Let's look at some hellö examples and some of your options.

Problem	Options/Tips
<p>The facilitator is sometimes arrogant and drives to his/her own agenda. öIt is all about ME!ö</p>	<p>Self-awareness is a facilitator's best friend. It's amazing how having capacity for introspection and the ability to see one's own motivations can keep you from alienating a group.</p> <p>Lighten up, it's not about you! You can do serious meetings without taking yourself too seriously. A little self-deprecating humor can put others at ease.</p>
<p>The facilitator sometimes is given great trust from sponsors and groups and everyone has a transformative experience. This happened for you once and has never happened again.</p>	<p>Facilitators LIVE for these moments! To make sure they can happen again, remember to debrief with the sponsor(s) and members of the group to capture the reasons why this worked so well and what can be done for this to occur again.</p> <p>Don't let your practice stagnate. Learn always and every time.</p>
<p>The facilitator is serving the sponsor, not the group. All of a sudden it is clear that what the sponsor wants is not in the interest of the group. What do you do?</p>	<p>This is a great example of the power of the sponsor. First, have a private conversation with your sponsor. It is OK to challenge your client and essential if you are a consultant. If that doesn't work, consider the option of bringing the contradictions to light with the group. Be careful not to put any individual too far at risk, including the sponsor. They are humans too, right?</p>
<p>The sponsor comes in and tries to take over the meeting. You've been hijacked, or undermined by your sponsor.</p>	<p>Time to pull out what was agreed upon in terms of purpose, outcomes, etc. If you have clarified this together (in writing!), take the sponsor(s) aside during a break and have a quick refresher on what was agreed. Do you need to renegotiate or was it just a slip by the sponsor into habitual practices?</p> <p>If you find the sponsor's behavior is affecting everyone, consider a process like öWhat I Need from Youö to help the sponsor become more aware of the dynamic:</p>

	<p>http://www.liberatingstructures.com/24-what-i-need-from-you-winfy/ⁱ</p>
<p>The facilitator runs into very interesting gender-related and other cultural issues that are often unspoken or unrecognized. For example, the men are speaking up and the women aren't.</p>	<p>Ah, the elephant in the room! There are always cultural and gender issues at play and it is important to pay attention to what is happening but also to raise these issues with the group and discuss them, rather than ignoring them.</p> <p>Consider processes like TRIZ that help groups make these issues discussable: http://www.liberatingstructures.com/6-making-space-with-trizⁱⁱ</p> <p>One other difference that can be missed by facilitators is the different patterns of meeting behavior and participation by quieter or introverted people. Consider the basic pattern of 1-2-4-all http://www.liberatingstructures.com/1-1-2-4-allⁱⁱⁱ) which starts by asking people to think/write their own ideas, then sharing in a safer, small configuration of 2 people, before speaking to the full group. There are countless variations on this that can improve contributions, and leapfrog more traditional open brainstorming processes.</p>
<p>The facilitator doesn't speak the local language and mistakes happen through interpretation.</p>	<p>If at all possible, have a facilitator who speaks the language, to avoid misinterpretations. The second choice would be to have a more spacious agenda to really deal with meaning making across multiple languages. Ask questions when something is unclear or seems off.</p>

The Space

When facilitators get together to talk shop (be it over coffee or whiskey!) one of the first things they often say is "wasn't that room HORRIBLE!" In the service of working with human beings with bodies, with limited attention spans and some hard wired learning paths in the brains, it can be hellish to walk into a room with the table and chairs nailed to the floor and oriented towards "the front." Not only is this contrary to

engagement and learning practices, it also feeds into the power dynamic of òshe/he who is at the front of the room is most important.ö But think about it: If you invite people to a meeting, each and every one of them should be important. And they should be in a humane environment. Letòs look at the hell and heaven of meeting rooms.

Problem	Options/Tips
The big huge table(s) takes up all the space.	Thatòs a tough one. At least, you can have some interaction by getting people to pair up, or to huddle in groups of 3. If it can be removed or moved to the side, DO IT!
I canòt move the tables or chairs.	Try to move the people around instead! Use shorter process cycles with a lot of standing up and circulating. You can even send people out in small groups for òwalking/talkingö sessions.
No, you canòt hang anything on the walls.	Most venues have rules about what you can use (or not!) on their walls. If they really wonòt even accept the tape that doesnòt leave any marks, always ask for a couple of back-up pin boards. Pieces of plywood or foam core stacked on chairs also works. Bring a roll of duct tape to secure your improvised pin boards. (But DONòT put the duct tape on the walls. It pulls off paint and wallpaper!)
No, you CANòT use those materials!	A smart facilitator always carries a toolkit with the basics: at least 20-25 water based markers, sticky notes of different sizes and colors, some sheets of colored paper or pre-made cards, painteròs tape (that doesnòt leave marks), bluetack (the sticky substance to post on walls), sticky dots for voting, etc.
No light, no windows, no air!	Plan energizers! Try to get people out of the room as much as possible. Find a big space either inside the venue (perhaps outside the room) or outside, weather permitting to do some interactive exercises. For example, a great way to surface opinions or test decision making is using the Human Spectrogram:

	http://www.kstoolkit.org/Human+Spectrogram ^{iv}
--	---

Practice

Finally, we leave the best for last. The actual facilitation practices. This brings all the hell (and heaven) of all the above categories into the actual moment we are there, with our group, in the room. Can you feel the perspiration building? The headache or stomach ache? Relax, with the hell, we bring some tips for heaven!

Problem	Options/Tips
You have been paired up with the co-facilitator from hell! You don't see eye to eye on anything, your styles are diametrically opposed and you end up contradicting each other in front of the group.	Once again, the purpose, outcomes, expectations, etc. need to be clear and agreed on by everyone involved. Focus on what needs to be done - the tasks at hand. It really helps to be able to define and design together but if this can't happen, be grown-ups and work toward the common goal together! If things are really bad, take turns versus co-facilitating.
A participant (or participants) is (are) trying to dominate the meeting.	Some people like to derail meetings for no good reason (other than to assert their dominance). But sometimes, people might have a genuine issue with the content or process (or both). Give them the space to air their issue and ask the group to chime in. Being heard may be enough to calm down this person's attempt at controlling the meeting. If others support this person's issues, then it's time to revise your game plan!
The facilitator actually "facipulates", or uses their power as a facilitator to force particular practices or outcomes on the participants.	Be honest when your approach has any manipulative elements. Use that in your favor, transparently.
The facilitator has no repertoire, gets stuck in one approach/or is flip flopping all over the place.	Always actively learn. Invite your "facilitees" into your learning process. Build capacity all around and check out the resources at the end of this community note!

	At the same time, avoid waffling or abandoning your intentions too soon. Most facilitation processes have moments of discomfort, what Kaner et al. call "the groan zone." That is part of the work. Step into it!
The facilitator works hard to facilitate listening but sometimes fails to listen themselves.	Learn how you listen. Understand the triggers that block listening and work hard to move around them. Consider the simple tactic of rephrasing: "what I heard you say was" " "
The facilitator does not develop capacity in others to facilitate.	Co-facilitate, mentor, and share or give up control. In the long run, the value you add by supporting the development of capacity in others is a huge added value.
The facilitator leaves after the meeting so does not live the consequences (good, bad or otherwise) from the meeting.	Consider simple follow up... how are things going? What did we learn? This prompt isn't only for the facilitator, but helps your sponsors and groups follow up as well.

Conclusion

So now you know that facilitation is neither a perfect or idealized practice. But you also know that it is a PRACTICE and that is how we can always learn, improve and innovate. If you are interested, stay tuned to the conversations on KM4Dev.org. Even better, ask a question regarding facilitation practice and you will receive advice from a group of enthusiastic facilitators. Plus, here are a few curated resources for you.

References

Gather: The Art and Science of Effective Convening:

<http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/uploads/files/934f8c4a-866a-44bc-b890-7602cc99aefa-rockefeller.pdf> - Accessed 21 November 2014

Hewlitt and Lamoureux. Introducing Knowledge Sharing Methods and Tools: A

Facilitator's Guide: http://www.ifad.org/pub/thematic/km/faciliator_guide.pdf - Accessed 21 November 2014

Kaner, S., Lind, L., Toldi, C., Fisk, S., Berger, D., Doyle, M. (2007). *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass; 3rd edition, 2014.

KSToolkit, a rich wiki collection of knowledge sharing tools and methods:
<http://www.kstoolkit.org> - Accessed 21 November 2014

Liberating Structures, a set of 33 methods for engaging and igniting participation:
<http://www.liberatingstructures.com> - Accessed 21 November 2014

Top Ten Tips for Skilled Facilitation: <http://www.petrohrsc.ca/media/14962/step2-top-ten-tips-for-skilled-facilitation.pdf> - Accessed 21 November 2014

About the contributors

Nancy White, Full Circle Associates, is a skilled online interaction designer, facilitator and coach for distributed CoPs, elearning, and virtual teams and communities. She is also a grandmother, chocoholic and long-time KM4Dev member. Most of all, she is a learner. Nancy White <http://www.fullcirc.com> nancyw [AT] fullcirc.com

Lucie Lamoureux, KM4D Associates, has worked with international development organizations and NGOs, supporting and facilitating their knowledge sharing, for the last 17 years. She was the lead facilitator of the KM4Dev Dgroup from 2001-2010 and is currently one of the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*'s Co-Editors. She is happily based in Brussels, Belgium, where the beer is cold and the waffles are warm. Lucie Lamoureux, <http://www.km4d.net>, llamoureux[AT]bellanet.org

ⁱ Accessed 21 November 2014

ⁱⁱ Accessed 21 November 2014

ⁱⁱⁱ Accessed 21 November 2014

^{iv} Accessed 21 November 2014