

In almost all government work settings, groups of people must work together to solve problems or achieve a common goal. Skills that help groups work together are invaluable in gathering information, identifying differences, exploring alternatives, and focusing support on a specific project.

Group facilitation

Government IT projects typically involve dozens of people making hundreds of decisions. People with vastly different work styles, backgrounds, and talents are often brought together, asked to form cohesive groups, and charged with solving problems. But people's differences and group dynamics can make it difficult for the group to fulfill its mission. That is why a skilled facilitator can be so helpful in leading a group through the necessary steps to make effective decisions.

What is it?

Intensive working meetings. Facilitated processes typically involve working meetings that use structured decision processes. These decision conferences allow for a rapid elicitation and combination of expert judgment and baseline empirical data from multiple people and points of view.

Specialized group management roles. A facilitator interacts directly with the participants by leading a group through activities and discussions designed to elicit ideas, encourage discussion, or lead to a decision. A facilitator is someone trained in group process and methods to build a group's capacity for managing its own activity. The facilitator typically works with a group for a limited time to build its capacity for effective work or to accomplish a specific task. A variety of tools and techniques are used by the facilitator to keep the group on task and moving through the process.

A way to help a group establish and work through an agenda. The facilitator is responsible for the quality of the group interaction and for helping the group reach satisfactory its goals. Thus, the facilitator has to leave her/his biases, opinions, and ideas at the door and concentrate on the group's needs.

What is it good for?

Carrying out a variety of group tasks. You can use facilitated group meetings for a variety of tasks, including: generating alternatives, coming up with priorities, describing cost-benefit scenarios, allocating resources, developing budgets, devising strategic plans, identifying potential problems and solutions, and planning project timelines. A skilled facilitator can make it easier for a group to work through these often complex tasks.

Managing the process. Often, people who are invested in a project need an outsider to help them work through the tasks listed above. Freed up from process issues, which are handled by the facilitator, the group can concentrate on the tasks at hand.

Improving information quantity and quality. A group, as a whole, has more information than any one individual has, and groups are better at catching errors than individuals are. Most important, the group process helps participants identify important terms and concepts, and it helps them explore their differences before formulating judgments or making choices.

Managing conflicts. Some conflict is a given in any group work situation. Often, conflict signals a need for more information. Whether conflict is caused by differing experiences, opinions, personalities, or missions, a good facilitator can explore conflicts while diffusing tense situations and keeping the process moving in a productive direction.

Some limitations and considerations

Cognitive and judgmental biases. Group decision conferences are subject to known cognitive and judgmental biases. "Group think" for example tends to reduce the number and variety of ideas that are expressed and explored. Research has shown that an accumulation of individual thinking usually results in more ideas for consideration than when a group does not allow time for individual reflection. Consequently, a facilitator should include some time for individual issue or idea generation as part of the overall process.

Blind spots. Facilitated meetings may also be hindered by "blind spots." Depending on the composition of the group, individuals may be less willing to be candid with respect to issues and opinions than they might be if their anonymity were ensured through some other type of issue identification process.

Sabotage. A decision conference can be sabotaged by one participant or a subset of participants who are either uninterested in the problem being addressed or unwilling to consider the potential solutions being discussed.

Lack of information. Participants may lack the information required to complete the task successfully. Participants may have difficulty envisioning the interactions between the units of a complex process or system, or they be unable to assess the level of effort that will be required to bring about substantial change. In addition, people may substitute assumptions for facts without being explicit (or sometimes even aware) about these substitutions.

For more information

Debus, M. (1990). **Handbook for excellence in focus group research**. Washington DC: Academy for Educational Development.

Hackman, J. Richard (2002) **Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances**. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Morgan, D., R. Krueger, and J. King (1998). **Focus Group Kit**. Volumes 1 -- 6. Thousand Oaks, Calif. : Sage Publications.

Reagan-Cirincione, P., S. Schuman, G. Richardson, and S. Dorf (1991). "Decision modeling: Tools for Strategic Thinking." **Interfaces** 21, 52-65.

Rohrbaugh, J. (1992). "Cognitive Challenges and Collective Accomplishments" in R.P. Bostrom, R. Watson, and S.T. Kinney (eds.), **Computer augmented teamwork: A guided tour**. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

A comprehensive list of reviews of group facilitation books is available at <http://reviewing.co.uk/reviews/group-facilitation.htm> [Accessed July 7, 2003]

Consensus building, collaboration, and decision making

Projects don't happen in a vacuum. Working with groups from other agencies and organizations is often required to successfully plan and implement an information technology project. These tools are ways of answering the question, "How can we help work teams function effectively?" Consensus-finding and building tools are often needed to help a team explore different views and conflicting objectives or interests. Teams also frequently need models for collaboration, especially if they have never worked together before.

What are they?

Meeting management methods, ground rules. Effective meeting management involves ground rules, agendas, clear purposes, facilities planning and preparation, careful recording of results, notification of members, and communication.

Methods for conflict resolution. Conflict is a normal part of group work that can result from adversarial relationships, different interests, or both. Techniques for conflict management include diagnosing the causes of the conflict, mediation, negotiation, and problem solving. Mediation involves helping the parties understand the possibilities, communicate effectively, and recognize opportunity for compromise. Negotiation provides a framework for finding a mix of compromises that will resolve the conflict. Well-understood rules and guiding principles can be particularly effective in conflict negotiation.

What are they good for?

Eliciting information, brainstorming. Facilitators often use nominal group process to elicit information from group members. In a nominal group process exercise, the facilitator provides an opportunity for each group

member to contribute to the discussion and share ideas. The results can be prioritized by voting methods in which all group members have equal influence on the results. Multi-voting, where each group member can vote for more than one choice or has multiple votes to distribute, can be very effective for complex decisions and help avoid forming factions within a group.

Understanding issues, resolving conflicts. Consensus-building tools are useful in facilitating the two key requirements for reaching agreements in a work group setting: identifying and understanding issues, and resolving conflicts. Some of the tools for identifying and understanding the issues -- SWOT analysis, hopes and fears exercises, strategic framework, and stakeholder analysis -- are described in this handbook.

Some limitations and considerations

Effective group process takes time. It's unreasonable to expect new groups to accomplish substantive work immediately. It is usually necessary to invest in building skills, shared understandings, and commitment to the group process.

Vulnerable to disruptive, subversive behavior. Individual members can wreak havoc on a group's efforts to work collaboratively. Without effective internal controls and norms, such behavior can derail group efforts.

Right people at the table. Good decisions about who is involved in group processes are often critical to success. It's possible to have too much as well as too little participation. Choosing the most effective group size and composition requires careful consideration of the needs of the group and the participating organizations.

For more information

Chrislip, D. D. and J. Parr (2002). **Collaborative Leadership**. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Johnson, D. W., and F. Johnson (2002). **Joining together: Group theory and group skills**. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Schein, E. H. (1998). **Process Consultation**, Vol. 1. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Schwarz, R. M. (2002). **The Skilled Facilitator**. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Schweiger, D. M., and W. R. Sandberg (1991). "A team approach to top management's strategic decisions." In H. E. Glass (ed.), **Handbook of Business Strategy**, 6: 1-20. New York, NY: Warren, Gorham and Lamont.

Straus, D. (2002). **How to Make Collaboration Work: Powerful Ways to Build Consensus, Solve Problems, and Make Decisions**. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Audience and presentation skills

It's an old Boy Scout saying, but particularly true here: be prepared. In order to effectively present your project, you need to know about the audience. Make sure you're prepared to address the concerns that they may have about your project and convince them that it is worth their time, attention, and money.

What are they?

Ways to prepare good presentations. The first step on the road to giving a good presentation is being prepared. Ask yourself questions you think your audience will ask. Put yourself in their place and look for gaps, mistakes, confusion, past experiences, and points of view that could lead to questions about your idea and its feasibility.

Methods for identifying audience concerns, biases. Think carefully about your audience. Your presentation style and content may change depending on who is in your audience. Some of the audiences you may encounter include: elected officials, appointed policy makers and key staff, government colleagues, professional organizations and unions, community groups and organizations, private sector interests, media organizations, and the public.

Ways to manage meetings. When planning a meeting to deliver your presentation, be sure you know who will

participate, who will speak, what they will say, what you want to accomplish, and what specific actions or decisions you want from the audience. Create and send an agenda to all participants, and brief all those who are attending the meeting with you about their roles and duties. It's important to give a brief overview of your case. The details should be included in the printed materials you leave behind. Be prepared to answer questions. And have someone in your group record the comments and questions raised, and the main points of the discussion.

Computer-enhanced presentations. It helps to have an outline from which to build your slides. One general rule to follow when creating your slides: less is more. Stick with one typeface, or two at the most. Make your key points with simple, short bullets. Be sure to carefully test the computer and projection equipment at the presentation site if possible. Have backup equipment or media available, since technology failures can occur at any time.

Effective deliveries. Be yourself and be enthusiastic about your project. Think of your delivery as an interaction with your audience, rather than a presentation to the audience. Make eye contact with the members of the audience instead of looking at the overheads. Speak clearly and at a pace somewhat slower than normal conversation. Let your confidence, conviction, and support show.

What are they good for?

Effective communication. You already know all about your project. But knowing about your audience helps bring you much closer to securing the support you need for it to go forward. Allow your project and audience knowledge to drive your presentation.

Knowing what to present and how. A thorough knowledge of the audience, its concerns, biases, and priorities will help you tailor your presentation. The contents and presentation style will vary depending on your audience. It's helpful to have a core set of basic facts and materials that you can customize for each audience.

Some limitations and considerations

Information-gathering problems. You may run in to roadblocks when it comes to gathering information about certain agencies and organizations. No matter the cause, you may have to make-do with what you can find. The key is to use whatever information you have to your advantage when designing your presentation.

Running out of time. No matter how prepared that you are for your presentation, you still can not control the amount of time that you will have with your audience. The meetings and presentations that went before yours may run long, or other circumstances with your audience may squeeze the amount of time with your audience. It is vital to be prepared for abridging your presentation and providing material that you can leave with your audience for when they have more time to focus on your initiative.

For more information

<http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/leader/leadpres.html> is a site devoted to giving presentations. [accessed June 11, 2003]

<http://www.public-speaking.org/public-speaking-articles.htm> is another comprehensive public-speaking site. [accessed June 11, 2003]

<http://www.presentations.com/presentations/index.jsp> this is a site with many articles about presenting. [accessed June 11, 2003]

<http://www.ukans.edu/cwis/units/coms2/vpa/vpa.htm> University of Kansas' "Virtual Presentation Assistant". [accessed June 11, 2003]