



## » The Real Brains Behind Better Facilitation

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Facilitation is one of the most critical soft skills of the business analyst, as well as one of the most difficult to master. Working with various stakeholders requires tremendous preparation, insight and finesse in addition to an understanding of key principles of the facilitation process. One must also consider how brains function and the way bodies react, which is a largely untapped method for BAs to glean valuable information that can improve the facilitation process. This article will provide a unique perspective on how to enhance facilitation skills, incorporate information based on physiological reactions, and as well describe appropriate techniques to use in response.

Defining what facilitation is—and what it isn't—reveals why it is an important and complicated process to conduct. What facilitation *is not* is a one-way push of information or an opportunity to vent. It's not meant to be a meeting in which one person dominates the conversation, people are not actively participating or personalities get in the way of productivity.

Facilitation is a way of providing guided leadership to ensure consensus and maximum participation, and helping individuals articulate goals, thoughts, visions and objectives. It's meant to challenge the status quo and enable participants to think beyond their own vision. For the business analyst, it's about encouragement and being a cheerleader. Pressed for a textbook definition, it could be described as a bi-directional exchange of relevant, actionable information that requires the business analyst to manage interactions in order to provide synergies among dynamic, often disparate personalities.

### Core Principles of Facilitation

Facilitation is about the process rather than the content. The content comes through the facilitation techniques, but the process entails moving the group in the same direction and ensuring the group is dealing proactively with the topic at hand, solving problems and making decisions. Within facilitation, there are rules, relationships, a unique climate and group dynamics to consider that create tremendous complexity. For BAs who are conducting the process, it's essential to understand and embody the following core principles to manage facilitation effectively:

1. **Remain absolutely neutral.** Neutrality prevents any members of the group from feeling excluded or marginalized. In the BA's role as facilitator, it is critical to demonstrate and lead with the principles and behaviors she or he wants the group to assume, and neutrality is at the

top of the list.

2. **Listen actively.** Turn off the blackberries and laptops to ensure attention to the matter at hand. Encourage acknowledgement and head nods to what's being said.
3. **Use appropriate language.** Pose questions or comments in a non-judgmental, respectful manner. For example, when a participant makes a comment that doesn't follow the train of thought or line of discussion, asking for additional thoughts to tie his or her thinking into the topic will prevent the participant from shutting down involvement while further building on the discussion in progress.
4. **Ask more than you answer.** A great facilitator will ask more questions rather than making statements. Facilitation is one of few times when it's appropriate and encouraged to respond to a question with more questions. Among the most thought-provoking questions to ask are why, why not and what if.
5. **Allow for the synthesis of ideas.** No matter how ridiculous a question or comment might seem, it's always worth exploring because you never know what such input will uncover. Being open to the development and exploration of ideas is a key objective for the BA during the facilitation process. Asking the open-ended why, why not and what if are the building blocks for enabling the synthesis of ideas to happen.
6. **Manage discussion backsliding or rambling.** There's a fine line between facilitating a synthesis of ideas and having the discussion digress off topic. A good facilitator must recognize how much line to let out before he or she reels the conversation back in to keep the intent focused and clear.
7. **Offer clear and objective summaries of what is being accomplished.** Interpret what is being said throughout the session back to the group in order to provide necessary feedback for participants so they better understand points of the discussion. This is accomplished through paraphrasing or re-articulating participants' contributions.
8. **Be conscientious about paraphrasing summaries.** The importance of being as natural as possible and non-condescending when re-articulating cannot be overstated. The summary is not meant to make the participant feel challenged, but to facilitate greater clarification. Rather than saying, "I heard you say we should build a rocket ship instead of a laser beam," try to actively engage the participant with a variation of paraphrasing. Try asking "Did you mean to infer that building a rocket ship will better address our problem than building a laser beam?" or "I'm not sure I understood your idea—can you present it from a different angle?"
9. **Give and receive feedback.** This is probably one of the most difficult principles for a facilitator. Feedback should be provided frequently, perhaps hourly before it's too late to

remedy a situation. The challenge is in providing feedback in a constructive way with the facilitator also taking responsibility for his or her role in the outcome. For example, the facilitator may tell the group that the discussion veered too far off track or that it didn't delve deeply enough. However, it's the facilitator's job to direct the discussion to avoid such missteps, and he or she must acknowledge that.

## Keys to Interaction

There are key components of interaction within which the core principles of facilitation take place. The first component is to recognize that in any audience or group interaction, everyone comes to the event with memories that create expectations for the current situation. Was their last workshop interesting and productive, or was it mind numbing? Their previous experiences create both positive and negative biases coming into the process.

The next component or consideration is to be acutely aware of the different traits and communication styles of the participants. This will enable the facilitator to know when to draw someone out, and when it might be necessary to cut away from someone else who dominates the conversation. Pre-facilitation interviews, and using the core principles, such as active listening and asking more questions than answering, will help the facilitator determine participants' characteristics.

The context in which the participant is attending the event is a third consideration of interaction. Circumstances such as a personality conflict with someone in the group can be a detriment or distraction in a facilitation group.

Another consideration is how the content or topic being discussed impacts peoples' interaction. They may not be confident, certain or knowledgeable in the subject matter, or conversely, they may have a high level of expertise that could create the impression within the group that they know it all.

Real-time filters and obstacles also impact interactions. They can be anything from an unexpected fire drill to lunch delivery that distracts from the discussion at hand to the high priority email that a participant can't wait to address.

Finally, empathy and acknowledgement are the glue that binds the participants in interaction. They build trust that creates positive communication and a successful facilitation experience.

## The Biology Behind Stakeholder Interactions

While the core principles and components of interaction above are designed to build BAs' skills in the artful execution of facilitation, the science behind it will help them identify tangible cues that will also enhance the process. Interaction within group facilitation has a lot to do with traits and behaviors, which are largely determined by how people are programmed biologically. While there are intricate nuances to personality types, in their simplest form, people demonstrate four general categories:

- Direct – Speaks forcefully, presents strongly, bottom-line focused; also impatient, sometimes

argumentative and poor at listening.

- Spirited – Persuasive, big-picture-focused, motivational, also tends to exaggerate, lose detail or be overdramatic.
- Systematic – Precise, concise, speaks efficiently, also overly-focuses on details, terse and vocally monotone.
- Considerate – Supportive, trusting and harmonious, listens well, tends to overemphasize feelings, avoid conflicts, not forthcoming with opinions.

In the BA's lifetime he or she may go through two or three dozen personality profile assessments. What's important to remember is that regardless of one's personality type, the BA must have the ability to adapt to the audience. Can you adjust your facilitation techniques to accommodate the various group personalities in order to get the most benefit from the participants' professional experience?

For example, when dealing with a direct personality, the facilitator may find it necessary to be more abrupt and shut someone down with a "Let's move along now." While the systematic personality may require more articulate explanations, care must be taken to balance those needs with the impatience of the direct personality. The spirited personality's tendency to overdramatize or exaggerate must be directed away from dismissing something as merely "stupid" and toward more descriptive and precise reasons for his or her position while still encouraging the innate enthusiasm. As the BA becomes more proficient in the interaction of facilitation, the blending of different personality types will become apparent.

The question underlying all these diverse personality traits is how did people get to be the way they are so that the BA can become more sensitive to them? Biology tells us that the brain is a recording machine that stores all the things people do on a daily basis and stores them depending on the types of things they do. It's an amazing processor that takes the information in and sorts, categorizes and stores it in the most appropriate place.

The prefrontal cortex is the region of the brain considered to orchestrate thoughts and actions in accordance with internal goals. This is where everybody's motivation resides to do something and to do something positive. This is also where conflicting thoughts reside that can counter positive thoughts. For example, a participant may think, "I have to attend a facilitation workshop and it's a wonderful professional opportunity." However, at a previous requirements workshop he was called upon and verbally fumbled, which led to eye rolling from a direct personality. So his prefrontal cortex is wondering if this workshop is going to be so great.

Simultaneously, the amygdala, the area of the brain that forms and stores memories associated with emotional events, kicks in. The amygdala provides the physical reaction to the perceived

embarrassment at the previous workshop, which can include immobility, rapid heartbeat, and rapid breathing. So when called upon in the current facilitation workshop, some of those reactions occur. Recognizing them, the facilitator can take the opportunity to supplant the negative, previous experience with a new, positive one. For instance, the facilitator can provide reassurance that the participant's contributions are of value, and offer to have the participant write suggestions down or whiteboard them instead of presenting them orally.

Creating positive experiences for the participant on a recurring basis will change the learned behavior that resides in the basal ganglia, or habit center, in the brain. The basal ganglia stores the positive experience that simultaneously acts on the amygdala so it no longer reacts to thoughts of a workshop with sweating and heart palpitations. In turn, the pre-frontal cortex has a positive goal on which to focus with no conflicting thoughts to achieving the goal.

The good news is that you don't have to be a neuropsychologist to create these reactions. It's interesting to understand the science of the body and useful to recognize physical cues, but practicing the core principles will actively stimulate brain activity creating positive experiences, regardless of whether you're aware of it. This will result in the group's willingness to participate, which is the overall goal of facilitation. Just let the brains do the work!



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