Facilitation Tip Sheet

The facilitator is responsible for managing meetings, keeping conversations on track, and ensuring each member's voice is heard. This tip sheet gives some tips for how to accomplish these tasks. You can also reference the **Advanced Facilitation Guide** for an advanced guide to facilitation (suggested for experienced facilitators).

You can read through this document as often as needed to help keep your responsibilities in mind. You might find it helpful to print it out and bring it with you to CoP meetings and events. We suggest that you coordinate your activities with the person who is leading your community as well as any Subject Matter Experts (SMEs).

What is Facilitation?

To facilitate is "to make easier" or "help bring about." (Merriam Webster). Thus, facilitation in the context of communities of practice is to help smoothly manage the flow and discussions of a meeting or event. The facilitator guides the dialogue and attempts to maximize member's time and energy by keeping the event and discussions on track – in terms of time and topic. By taking a group through a process that produces a specific outcome (learning, decision-making, problem-solving, etc.), facilitation generally encourages all members to participate in some way, shape or form. By recognizing and utilizing the unique and valuable contributions of each member, an effective facilitator increases the collective value of the entire community. By mediating the group process, the facilitator plays an active and critical role in ensuring that a community taps deeply into its own knowledge.

What Makes a Good Facilitator?

Competent facilitators have both personal characteristics and acquired skills that make them good at what they do. Many good facilitators make a difficult process seem very natural and intuitive, even when lots of planning and training goes into the craft. We've listed some key characteristics here and they are explained in additional detail in the "Advanced Facilitator's Guide."   Chances are, if you've volunteered to take on this role, you have these traits or you have an inclination toward them.

- Good facilitators value people and their ideas
- Good facilitators think quickly and logically
- Good facilitators are excellent communicators
- Good facilitators are both product and process oriented

What are the Facilitator's Basic Responsibilities?

As a facilitator, you will want to take some basic steps as part of your responsibilities during a meeting or event. The basics are listed below. In the **Advanced Facilitation Guide**, the basic responsibilities are explained in greater detail. Additional responsibilities that advanced facilitators often take on are also outlined there.

- **Prepare in Advance.**

  Good facilitators make their work look effortless and natural, but prepare in advance to be effective. Take into consideration the "who, what, why, and where" of your meeting or event to help you figure out the "how."

- **Plan and Distribute the Agenda.**

The meeting agenda is the document that defines what will be done at any particular meeting or event, and it helps both leaders and participants know what to expect and how to prepare. Working with the coordinator and the subject matter expert should get you on the right track for the content of the agenda. You may want to consider using **Attachment A – Meeting Agenda** as a basis from which to build your full meeting plan.

- **State your objectives at the beginning of the event.**

  Members will be much better prepared to contribute and help you meet the objectives if they know what they are. Again, work with the coordinator and SME to determine these – you may even want to have the coordinator or SME present the intended outcomes. Your job as a facilitator is to ensure that the group understands what needs to be accomplished.

- **Establish Community Expectations.**

  These ground rules help participants establish appropriate ways to interact with each other during the meeting or event. Refer to the **"Community Expectations"** resource for more information. In a nutshell, you want the group to agree to a respectful, collaborative process. By stating the rules up front and getting agreement from the group, you're more likely to see that happen.

- **Guide the group in presenting and sharing information.**

  Your methodology may vary, but the methods you use should include all members in the discussion and prevent one or two members from dominating the dialogue. Everyone may not talk, but no one should feel excluded from the process.

- **Provide closure and reiterate action items**.

  As part of ensuring that all ideas and points are captured accurately, it is also the role of the facilitator to ensure that action items are noted and that follow-up on the item is assigned to someone. Consider using **Attachment B - Follow-Up Item Log** as a way to track action items, particularly over time.

What Do I Do? Some Trouble-Shooting Tips

As a facilitator, you may be required to intervene to keep the event on track and obtain optimal productivity. Listed below are some tips for intervening in particular circumstances. Each is explained in additional detail in the **Advanced Facilitator's Guide.**

Staying on-task and on-time.

Your community may have a lot to get accomplished in a short amount of time. With groups of passionate and knowledgeable people, it is easy to veer off onto other topics or easily get side-tracked by minute details of a conversation. In order to help the group stay focused, you may want to:

- Remind the group of the "keep focused" expectation
- Don't be afraid to directly re-focus the group on a particular agenda item
- Try to close the item or set it aside in a "parking lot" for consideration later
- Let the community decide

Dealing with unproductive behavior.

Difficult behavior is often unintentional or occurs as the result of an emotionally charged situation. You might be dealing with inattentive members who are engaging in side-bar conversations, taking calls or indiscreetly dealing with e-mail. You might also be dealing with personal agendas or disrespectful behavior. Progressive intervention will most often assist you in dealing with behavior that does not help the community achieve its meeting goals or objectives.

- Use gentle and appropriate humor for redirection
- Restate the ground rules directly

- Direct your questions to the individual for clarification
- Seek help from the group
- Address the issue at a break or offline

Stimulating productive inquiry.
While passionate people often have a lot to say and suggestions for action, it is not uncommon for communities to experience lulls in an on-going conversation or a stand-still in a single event. You might want to use the following techniques to keep the conversation going.
- Use probing questions
- Invite the experts to speak up
- Call on individuals in the group
- Invite debate

References

1. Willkinson, Michael. "Facilitation Excellence: The Seven Separators: What separates top facilitators from good ones?" at: http://www.leadstrat.com/library/articles.asp. July 2008.

2. Tarmiz, Halbana. Jan de Vreede, Gert. Sigurs, Ilze. 2006. "Identifying Challenges for Facilitation in Communities of Practice." Proceedings of the 39th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences

3. Good Group Decisions, Inc. 2007. "Characteristics of Good Meeting Facilitators." Good Group Decisions, Inc., 98 Maine Street, Brunswick, ME 04011. Accessed at: www.GoodGroupDecisions.com. July 2008

4. Willkinson, Michael. "Target Characteristics of Facilitator Candidates." available at: http://www.leadstrat.com/library/articles.asp. July 2008.

5. "Basic Facilitation Skills." May 2002. The Human Leadership and Development Division of the American Society for Quality, The Association for Quality and Participation, and The International Association of Facilitators.

6. "Community of Practice Design Guide A Step-by-Step Guide for Creating Collaborative Communities of Practice" Copyright © 2004, iCohere, Inc.

Attachment A – Meeting Agenda

Meeting Title / Purpose

Logistics				
Date:		**Time:**		
Location:		**Conference Details:**		

Meeting Materials Required
▪   ▪   ▪

Participants			
Facilitator:		**Note taker:**	
Moderator:		**Other:**	
Invitees:			
Objectives:	▪ ▪ ▪		

Agenda Topics	Time	Lead

Attachment B – Follow-Up Item Log

Action Item Description	Priority (H/M/L)	Date Added	Assigned To	Date Due	Status	Comments