

Facilitating and Coaching Teams: Tips and Techniques

Grace L. Duffy, Cathy Montgomery, and John W. Moran

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Facilitating and coaching teams are learned skills that require education, observation, and hands-on experience. The authors have used facilitation and coaching techniques with over a thousand teams to get them back on track and performing at maximum potential. This article includes tips on some effective techniques for facilitating and coaching teams.

Facilitation is used in a variety of contexts including training, experiential learning, conflict resolution, and negotiation.¹ Facilitation is the process of helping groups or individuals learn, find a solution, or reach consensus without imposing or dictating an outcome. Facilitation empowers individuals or groups to learn for themselves or to find their own answers to problems without control or manipulation. Facilitators need good communication skills, including listening, questioning, and reflecting.

Coaching is defined as partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.² Facilitation and coaching are closely related. Both facilitators and coaches strive to get clients or teams to improve performance. Coaching is slightly more directive than facilitation. The distinction between facilitation and coaching often becomes blurred. At times, a group is led through facilitation to a resolution. At other times, directive coaching is necessary in order to get the group moving.

In this chapter the authors assume that the facilitation or coaching services have been requested by a team experiencing some sort of difficulty reaching their assigned goal. Facilitation/coaching interventions must be well planned with the team leader so that additional damage is not done to the team. A facilitator or coach may be assigned to help guide a team through the problem-solving process. The tips and techniques presented here should be followed at startup to help the team reach its maximum performance level as quickly as possible.

Before attempting any team facilitation or coaching, it is important to make sure that a Team Charter is in place as a baseline of the team's activities. The charter provides start-up direction that a team needs to be successful in tackling the task that it has been assigned. Often teams spend valuable resources trying to figure out what it is they are supposed to do. If the team is struggling with this issue, then the facilitator or coach should get the sponsor together with the team to complete a team charter.

¹ The CBS Interactive Business Network. Facilitation. <http://www.coachmatching.co.za/services/emotional-intelligence/facilitation>. Copyright 2011. Accessed March 30, 2010.

² International Coach Federation. <http://www.coachfederation.org/>. Copyright 2010. Accessed March 30, 2010.

Example:

The Florida Department of Health facilitates a collaborative of nine county health departments (CHD) working on quality improvement projects over a three year period to reduce rates of childhood overweight and obesity in their counties.

At the beginning of the project, each CHD coordinated a team of peers to develop goals, objectives, strategies and activities; only one team developed a charter, outlining roles and responsibilities of team members.

Each year, a survey was conducted among collaborative team members to assess project successes, lessons learned, use of quality improvement tools, and experience participating in a collaborative. A component of the survey asked participants to provide information and feedback on aspects of their team's performance.

Two-thirds (65%) of survey respondents (n = 17) reported that their project teams were composed of multiple program areas within the CHD. No consistency was shown in the frequency of meetings, and even when teams met, only 35.3% of respondents said that their meetings were productive.

Shifts in priorities (e.g., H1N1; Haitian relief efforts) and staff turnover reduced the number of members available to work on projects in multiple CHD teams. Other team members became disengaged because their role and purpose were not clear.

One team member wrote:

“(QI) projects often assume people know how to work in teams. In fact, it is a skill set that requires just as much training and guidance as any other (QI) tool. If a person functions in a positive team, there is great satisfaction achieved; however, (QI) tools alone and objectives will not prepare people for basics on how to function as a team.”

Successfully facilitating and coaching a team requires building a partnership among the facilitator/coach, sponsor, team leader, and team members. This partnership is most effective when ground rules, clear expectations, specific time frames, and goals and measures of success are established. The overall goal is to build a culture of commitment and accountability to the assigned task within the team.

The goal of team facilitation and coaching is to establish trust, build rapport and open communication, clarify key roles and responsibilities, and establish goals. An effective personal development plan and a mentoring agreement should be created between the facilitator/coach and the individuals within the team.

To be an effective facilitator and coach, eight key rules need to be followed:

1. Know the needs of the team. The coach must address current team needs, not some desired future state.

2. Confirm that the team is ready to be coached:
 - a. Will they be receptive to coaching?
 - b. Have they requested coaching or been told to receive it?
 - c. What do they expect to get from coaching?

3. Set realistic expectations with the team and team sponsor:
 - a. Establish goals for the coaching or facilitating outcomes.
 - b. Clarify whether the purpose is to facilitate a team activity or conduct individual team member coaching. The difference between the two will show up here.
 - c. Build trust, establishing who is to receive a report of results. Making it clear to the team that the outcome of the coaching is important will help to build trust.
 - d. Establish when and where coaching or facilitating will take place.

4. Observe the team:
 - a. Identify destructive behaviors engaged in by individuals.
 - b. Document specific incidences of inappropriate behavior.
 - c. Document strengths and weaknesses of team members and the team as a unit.
 - d. Understand what team members think is hindering their progress toward the goal.

5. Measure where the team is using a team development model such as Tuckman's Group Development Model³ of forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning.
 - a. Understand where the team is currently. Document the behaviors that indicate that the team is in that stage.
 - b. Understand the history of the team and what the biggest challenges in working as a team have been.
 - c. In Chapter 3 it was discussed that a well-developed team charter helps to move the team to the performing stage. An effective charter answers a number of issues that usually arise in the norming and storming phase of team startup. The facilitator/coach must ensure that a well-developed team charter is in place before attempting any changes.

6. Develop an Improvement Plan:
 - a. Describe the impact of team behaviors, both positive and detrimental.
 - b. Review causes that lead to bad outcomes for the team.
 - c. Set realistic change expectations for team behavior.
 - d. Build the improvement plan around individual member and team strengths.
 - e. Describe specific corrective actions to overcome observed weaknesses.
 - f. Indicate any training that may be required and how that training may be obtained.

7. Confidentiality:
 - a. Ensure that what is observed, recommended, or assisted with remains confidential.

³ Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Tuckman's Stages of Group Development. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forming,_storming,_norming_and_performing, Updated March 25, 2011. Accessed March 29, 2010.

- b. If a finding must be reported to someone higher in the organization, the team must be informed at the outset.
8. Follow-Up:
 - a. Set a time to follow up with the team to see if progress has been made.
 - b. Ask them to send brief updates on a regular basis about what is and is not working.

The following are some typical examples of issues that the authors addressed with teams in facilitation or coaching roles. Some of these might be encountered when helping a team:

- Clarify objectives and goals for the team; return to the team charter.
- Coach a group of people into a cohesive team.
- Dissolve hidden agendas held by one or more of the team members.
- Encourage team members to commit and be accountable for their actions.
- Help the team define the obstacles that are impacting progress. Coach the team on how to overcome these obstacles.
- Move from hoping to be a team to acting and functioning like a team.
- Generate efficiency in the team's approach to problem analysis.
- Help the team model other high performing teams' success.
- Overcome a team's feeling of frustration and failure.
- Keep them going through encouragement and recognition so that they finish their task.
- Coach team members who have a difficult time confronting one another on important issues.
- Establish and clarify roles and responsibilities for the team members.
- Develop good meeting practices and set ground rules for the team to follow to enhance their time together.
- Overcome the disruption of one dominant team member.
- Encourage and involve those who hold back or are quiet.
- Help the team focus on the possibilities, not the obstacles.
- Help resolve destructive differences.

Whatever team issue is encountered, it is always a good idea to discuss it with another facilitator/coach to get two viewpoints on how to approach the issue. Once the cause of the issue is fully understood, developing an action plan to get the team back on track is the next step.

The need for facilitation and coaching interventions can be reduced by utilizing the following *Guidelines for Teams to Work Effectively*.⁴ This list applies to all teams as they begin and progress toward their goal; and can be used as a checklist by the sponsor or team leader to help ensure a smooth teaming process.

⁴ Fetteroll G, Hoffherr G, Moran J. *Growing Teams*. Salem, NH: Goal/QPC; 1993.

1. Establishing goals and objectives that all team members accept, thereby developing team ownership is crucial. Before facilitating or coaching a team or even presenting information, asking the group what they expect to achieve by the end of the meeting is an important action. Documenting their responses on flipchart paper helps to visualize their expectations. Allowing the group to verbalize expectations helps team members and the facilitator establish the same vision for the meeting. Posting the expectations and reviewing the list with the group at the end of the meeting to verify that most, if not all, of the expectations were addressed is also important.
2. Allowing each team to define its own standards of performance—not dictated standards but ones they believe in and will follow—will lead to greater success.
3. Encouraging members to disagree in a constructive way to resolve problems is positive; team members must feel comfortable with each other to have a constructive disagreement. Before facilitation of a team, establishing *Ground Rules* for the meeting is prudent. The Florida Department of Health’s Office of Performance Improvement (HPI) facilitates several strategic planning teams each year. One method they found to be effective is printing and laminating *Ground Rules* that are taped to the floor at the entrance to the meeting space. The rules get noticed! Reviewing the *Ground Rules* with team members to ensure that everyone understands expected behaviors works.

HPI’s *Ground Rules* include:

- Welcome all ideas
 - Listen actively
 - Respect what others say
 - Allow everyone to participate
 - Allow one person to speak at a time
 - Discuss issues, not individuals
4. Reviewing past actions when making plans for the future helps the team to see where they have been successful and unsuccessful and why that has happened. They can learn from their mistakes.
 5. Making decisions by consensus helps all team members feel that their ideas were considered and that they are part of the process. The Florida Department of Health’s Office of Performance Improvement has facilitated and coached a number of advisory councils and strategic planning teams. One method used to determine consensus of the group is to use red and green “voting” cards. After discussions of an issue, the facilitator may make a recommendation or proposal to the group to move them forward. Group members are asked to hold up the green card if they approve of the recommendation, and “votes” are counted. Similarly, group members are asked to hold up the red card if they do not approve of the recommendation. These members may be asked to provide an alternate proposal or request further discussion about the issue and recommendations. In either event, allowing everyone an opportunity to cast a vote helps teams eventually reach consensus.

6. Remaining cohesive and maintaining a sense of unity gives the team a sense of shared purpose which can be built upon to move the whole team to a higher level of performance.
7. Striving for synergy occurs when the team members build on each other's thoughts and ideas and get the creative juices flowing.
8. Developing a comfortable working atmosphere creates a positive and active climate in which the team can function and interact with one another. Since 1999, the Florida Department of Health has measured the satisfaction of its employees to provide data needed to improve the work environment. The way that employees feel about their work environment is important and can impact performance in many ways from overall productivity to customer satisfaction, as well as the ability to recruit and retain a well-qualified workforce.

Based on Employee Satisfaction Survey results, employees at local health departments and state health offices, divisions, and bureaus formed work groups to discuss opportunities for improvement. To create a climate where employees felt comfortable sharing what they thought the root causes of issues were and provide suggestions for improvement, it was important to separate the management team from the group. This allowed employees more freedom to share their thoughts and ideas about issues.

Also key to providing a safe climate was the review and understanding of ground rules with particular emphasis being placed on confidentiality.

9. Using physical work space that is conducive to the team process, including the right temperature and comfortable seating, provides an environment for a productive meeting. The room should have all the necessary tools such as a flip chart and markers, to allow the team to capture their ideas. This rule seems like common sense, but often ideas are lost because they are not written down. Room set-up is critical to engaging participants at meetings. For example, if the facilitator is using PowerPoint or an overhead projector screen, placing the screen at the front of the room on the facilitator's dominant side (e.g. right side if he/she is right-handed) limits the number of times that the facilitator turns away from the audience, allowing eye contact to be maintained. Flipcharts should be placed to the facilitator's non-dominant side.
10. Listening to each other and providing useful feedback are essential skills for all members of the team. They must be able to understand and comprehend what others are saying. This skill should be taught during team training and reinforced by the team leader at all meetings.

An overly vocal person can easily sabotage a meeting and can be persuasive enough to lead others to "groupthink."

While suppressing the flow of ideas is not a goal, two methods that the facilitator may use to restrain the person who will not allow others to share their ideas are:

- a) Moving the person to the facilitator's non-dominant side, limiting direct eye contact with the facilitator and drawing attention away from the talkative person and engaging others in the discussion. One way to move an audience once they have been seated is to place colored markers in the center of each table during room set up. Asking participants to select a colored marker, noticing what color the talkative person selects, and then asking all participants who selected those colored markers to move to the table that is on the speaker's non-dominant side not only eliminates distractions from the "talker" but is also an effective technique for breaking up cliques in a group setting.
 - b) Walking around the room and laying a hand on a person's shoulder usually works to quiet the person and allows others to engage. People from some cultures do not like to be touched, so it is important to know the audience before trying this method.
11. Using constructive criticism to facilitate group interaction is often effective, though personal direct criticism should not be tolerated. Constructive debates help teams to make better decisions.
 12. Allowing members to express their ideas fully and frankly is essential. When members express themselves, making sure that they are not advancing any personal agendas intended to sidetrack the team is important. It is difficult to facilitate or coach an individual or a team who has his/her own ideals or "agenda." One way to capture ideas that may not be relevant to the group's objectives is to establish a *Parking Lot*. At the beginning of the meeting, explaining that the *Parking Lot* will be used to document thoughts or suggestions which may or may not be used in activities decided on by the group will help participants to understand that it is important to contribute, though their ideas might have to be considered later. This documentation validates that a person's comments have been heard and allows the meeting and flow of ideas to continue.
 13. Recognizing individuals for the contribution that they make within the team is an incentive to help team members continue to share their expertise, ideas, and thoughts with the rest of the team.
 14. Assisting members toward successful completion of team goals reinforces team members' obligation to help one another when someone is struggling to accomplish a task. Team members need to feel comfortable asking for help. One approach to keep meetings and team members on task is to develop an agenda for every meeting. Outlining meeting goals or objectives and identifying topic areas for discussion are necessary.

Dividing the agenda into three columns and identifying the topic to be discussed in Column 1 sets the stage. Notes or any activities related to the topic that have occurred since the previous meeting should be outlined in Column 2. Column 3 is the Action Register where activities that need to be completed before the next scheduled meeting

and people responsible for completing the activities are listed. The Action Register should be reviewed at each meeting. Members are accountable for completing their assigned tasks and remaining engaged. If team members are unable to meet their obligations due to shifting priorities, meetings provide an opportunity for members to ask for help. An agenda with an Action Register keeps activities moving towards the completion of team goals.

15. Valuing creative approaches to problems is a characteristic of the most effective teams. Creativity is a way to stimulate team members to greater heights of performance and productivity.
16. Incorporating flexibility in the team's thoughts and action allows team members to grow, feel free to make mistakes, and have faith in their ability to contribute to team achievements. If the team is rigid, it will stifle creativity.

Summary

Facilitation and coaching are as much arts as sciences. They are skills honed through hands-on experience interacting with many teams in the group development process. Those who accept the role of a team facilitator or coach must understand the natural behaviors of teams and the individuals who comprise them.

[*Applications and Tools for Creating and Sustaining Healthy Teams*](#) addresses a number of characteristics exhibited by successful teams. Chapter 13 focuses on the third party brought in to create a motivating atmosphere through which the team can increase performance. A healthy team is a system, just as the corporation or department is a system. Very little occurs in a vacuum within a team; one action impacts another action. The effective team leader, facilitator, and sponsor must maintain constant association with the team to support progress towards their goal. Newly formed teams or individuals new to teamwork will need closer monitoring than more seasoned teams. The facilitator and team leader must respect the empowerment of team members to take charge of their own success. This balance of coaching and encouragement is an ongoing challenge for champions, team leaders, and facilitators.

The authors wish the reader success in forming and growing healthy teams within their organization. Working with teams is a rewarding activity and one the authors recommend to all who seek to improve organizational performance.