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World of Professional Discipline

OBSERVATION & INTERVENTION SKILLS

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Facilitators are taught to watch for a whole range of factors that influence the dynamics in the group...atmosphere, participation levels, influence, etc. etc. There are hundreds of possible ways to dissect groups along the various dimensions.

Some facilitators get so caught up in observing the minute details of the group's interaction, that they become what I call "hand-cuffed facilitators"—someone who is trying to concentrate on so much at one time, that they are overwhelmed and thus unable to make a difference, helplessly watching the action and longing for the time that they will be freed! Effective observation and intervention skills are vital to ensuring that the group remains productive and your career remains viable.

We've all heard the 'war stories' of fantastic conflict between group members and the carnage that is left behind in meeting rooms, of participants that plead with the facilitator to keep group members from killing each other. In over 13 years of full-time employment as a group facilitator, and with over 1,700 meetings behind me, I am proud

to say that I have yet to have a fatality and the only blood spilled was from the 84 odd paper cuts I sustained. These stories are highly exaggerated...making effective observations and interventions is not as complicated as it is made out to be. Don't overly complicate things or you will lose sight of the forest for the trees. We've all heard of "Management by Results", and in this paper, I will advocate "Facilitation by Results".

Facilitation By Results

It is easy for the facilitator to get caught up in the details and miss the bigger picture. Remember that your role is to enable the group to accomplish its goals. To do this, simply ask yourself, "Is this working for the group or not?" You'll know it's working if the group is making progress towards their meeting objectives. If they are...great! Let them keep working. What if someone is being abrupt with another person? Should you intervene? As long as it doesn't shut the other person down and create a performance problem for the group, let the group continue to get the job done. Forget about what you believe to be the "acceptable" way for people to treat each other. Let the group work in whatever manner they chose, provided they are making progress toward their meeting objective.

Sometimes facilitators take their biases into meetings...everyone should be nice to everyone else, interest in the topic must always remain high, no one should have side conversations, everyone must voice an idea and visibly participate, etc. etc. Be that as it may, foremost on the minds of meeting attendees is getting the work done.

Facilitation By Results: Observing Group Interaction

Why Observe Groups?

Facilitators observe groups to determine if the group dynamics are either supporting or hindering their ability to have meaningful conversations that enable them to accomplish their objectives. By dynamics, we are simply referring to ‘how’ people are interacting and behaving. Your observations must always be in service of enabling the group to accomplish their meeting objectives.

Don’t fall into the trap of observing groups merely for the sake of it. Put aside your checklist of the various dimensions you need to be tracking, and instead, focus your energy at a higher level and really, on what is most important to your client group...is the work getting done?

Observation Skills: The C-P Framework (Content and Process)

Monitoring Interaction: Content and Process

Think about group interaction in terms of whether it is ‘content interaction’ or ‘process interaction’. By ‘interaction’, I am referring to the group’s discussion, decisions or actions. Process interaction is comprised of discussions and decisions about how the group will work together, e.g., how will decisions be made, in what sequence will the group address agenda items, etc. Content-related interaction, on the other hand, is when the group is sharing information on the subject matter of the meeting, e.g., listing decision criteria, evaluating alternatives, making decisions, etc. In order to “get the work done,” the group must be clear about how they will work together (process) and what they are working on (content) at all times.

The Balancing Act: C-P Orientations

Often groups delve right into content interaction without ensuring that everyone clearly understands and agrees with the process that will be followed to achieve the objectives. Our tendency to “get on with the job” without clarifying the process is a result of our societal bias for action. This results in the “fire-ready-aim” approach to discussions. It is almost comical when participants realize that they have been discussing different aspects of different issues and hadn’t even been clear on the objective at hand. Ensuring a sound process before getting into content is part of getting the job done too.

People differ on the level of detail they require when determining the best process. You will hear, “Let’s quit talking about it and just get on with the job!” In essence, these people are saying, “The process is clear enough for me, so let’s get into content now.” Invariably, other attendees will be the ‘over-engineering’ kind—wanting to specify every step of the process, anticipate problems, develop contingency plans, etc. How do you resolve the discrepancy between the needs of the content-biased attendees (who just want to “get on with it”) and the needs of process-oriented attendees (who still want to clarify “how are we going to get it done”)? Negotiation. The key is to provide a level of clarity on the process that is ‘adequate’ for both groups. By adequate, I mean that the majority of the group is clear about the next steps (process) and ready to move into subject matter discussions (content).

For instance, if Stan is pushing for clarity on whether agenda item 7 will be done as a large group or if subgroups would be a better idea for that discussion, and other participants are growing frustrated by the level of detail in planning the process, you should suggest, “Stan, I’m sensing a growing desire from other group members to get

going on the agenda items. I suggest we revisit the issue of sub-grouping once we're further along in the meeting and we have a better idea as to what the best approach would be at that point. Does that work for you?"

As the facilitator, you must lead the 'negotiation' with the group to arrive at a way forward that satisfies the majority of group members, "the critical mass," but takes into consideration the concerns of other individuals. Decisions on how the group will work together must be consensual or you'll have a difficult time getting through the agenda. As the meeting proceeds, you will need to further refine and revise processes. The negotiations on how much time to spend on each interaction will be ongoing.

Two Parts to 'Process'

There are two components to process interaction: task and social. Task process has to do with 'how' the group is getting the job done. Social processes refer to 'how' members of the group get their psycho-social needs met. If people have awareness of process, it will tend to be the task process rather than the social process. For instance, you may hear groups discussing task processes such as their meeting agenda, roles, time allocation, etc.

Discussions regarding social process are far less frequent. Not because there is nothing to be said, but typically because groups "don't know how to go there." Social process discussions include how people feel about the task at hand—their level of interest, caring or commitment. Is this valuable to know? Absolutely! Why? Try this: What influence does your emotional state have on your ability to perform? None, some, or high influence? Most of you will agree that your emotional state has at least some influence. Now take that to a group setting, where not only do we have your emotional

state but everyone else's too. Add to that the influence each emotional state has on the others. As a facilitator, if you cannot understand or address the emotional state of the group, your effectiveness is significantly decreased. When managers ask for committed, dedicated, highly motivated individuals and teams, what are they describing? Social process stuff.

My experience with groups is that if you create and maintain a productive task process, and the group makes progress towards their goals, the social process side of things usually takes care of itself. It is amazing how people's psycho-social needs are met when we ensure there is meaningful conversation on stuff that really matters to people.

“At the heart of improving group effectiveness lies the ability of group members to reflect on what they are doing, in order to create the conditions necessary to

Watch the Forest to Get at the Right Tree

As you watch the group working, ask yourself, “Is the group advancing towards its objectives?” Stay with this question and monitor the group at this general level. Don't get caught up in the minute detail, for instance, assessing the influence level of each group member, as this will unnecessarily complicate your task and you'll likely miss the forest for the trees. Remember that the group is here, first and foremost, to get work done.

If you suspect that things aren't working, progress isn't being made, then ask yourself, “What is preventing them from achieving their objectives? What is going on? Why are people behaving as they are? What is causal to these difficulties that the group is experiencing?” A facilitator is well served by a natural curiosity. “Why do people behave the way they do?” Remember, “Stay cool. Stay curious.” Give the interaction

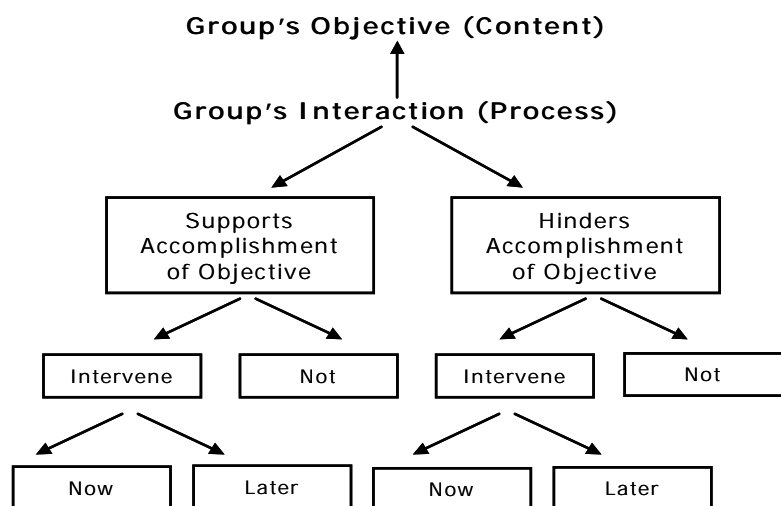
time to play out. Avoid ‘pouncing’ on the group’s every ‘side conversation’ or ‘hick-up’. Look for clues that will give you insight into the group’s dynamics. Observe, understand and give it a moment...the situation may well correct itself.

Watch not only for the potential cause of the difficulty, such as someone dominating the group, but also observe the impact on the group. Is it shutting other people down, are some people growing frustrated? The bottom line is, is the impact of what you are observing hindering the group and impeding their progress to their goal? If the answer is yes, you’ll want to intervene.

Facilitation By Results: Making Effective Interventions

W. Brendan Reddy, author of ‘Intervention Skills’ writes, “An intervention refers to any comment, suggestion, or recommendation that the consultant makes to the group in the service of accomplishing the task.” Keep in mind that interventions are not only appropriate to address ineffectiveness but may also be appropriate to address effective group interaction.

The chart indicates various alternatives when making interventions. Now that you’ve assessed the group’s interaction and decided an intervention is appropriate (see “intervene” branches), the next question you must ask yourself is, “When is the best time



to intervene? Now or later?”

Carefully consider the timing. There are a number of reasons to make the intervention after the work has been done. Never allow your intervention to become a ‘hindrance’ to the group’s productivity! I will sometimes reserve my intervention for the debriefing at the close of the meeting, stating my observations at that time.

If you decide it is time to intervene, consider the following approach to addressing the group’s ineffectiveness.

How to Intervene: Bringing Into the Open the Unsaid

1. Stop the Conversation

The first step when intervening is to stop the action and grab the attention of the group. I often say, “Time out!” North American sports fans also appreciate the use of the accompanying hand gesture of a “T”. Other times, it is enough to simply say, “Folks...?”

At this point, a short and powerful intervention is simply asking the group, “Is this working for you? Why?” People can usually tell when things aren’t right. If they are generally in agreement that things aren’t going well, advance to Step 6.

2. Introduce the Intervention

Even if you have a good understanding of what is happening in the room, you might have difficulty formulating your feedback. Consider these useful phrases when introducing your intervention: “Let me describe a pattern I’ve been observing...”, “I would like to offer this observation...”, “Here is an alternative you may want to consider...”

3. Describe Your Observations

I like to think of this step as ‘holding up a mirror’ to the group. Your effectiveness in this step will be commensurate with your ability to be descriptive, objective, fair and accurate in your observation. Do not use judgmental language, as people will not hear it. How do you respond when someone labels your behavior? Receptive? No way! It is easy to label someone and pass judgments, but to fairly and objectively describe what’s going is one of the core skills of a facilitator. That’s why the client hired you.

When intervening, keep the ‘mirror’ metaphor forefront in your mind. Aim to be ‘objective’ and ‘fair’ in your observations. Describe actual behaviour or events to create an accurate picture or “reflection” of what was going on. In fact, with a clear, “no-nonsense” description of the events as they unfolded, you may be labeled as aggressive. Why? I think people are just not used to being called into account for their actions.

The ability to provide feedback is essential to effective facilitation. With our observations, we are “bringing into the open the unsaid.”

4. Test for Agreement

You’ve made your own observations, but check with the group to ensure that they see things the same way. If they do, great! Proceed to the next step. If they don’t agree with your observation, accept their feedback and continue to observe.

In some cases, you may get a split in the group—some agree with your description of events and others are in denial. What should you do? Try to get agreement on what is going on in the group. Remember, you are not looking for an admission of guilt, you simply want to put the group in touch with reality—the reality of

what was happening in the meeting. One tactic is to call it as it is, “Well, what do you make of this? We are all in the same meeting after all.” This often stimulates the discussion.

Keep in mind some people struggle with seeing reality, particularly as it may pertain to their shortcomings. Robert Fritz, a prominent management consultant, observes, “Reality is an acquired taste.” Once you are far enough along on testing for agreement, proceed to the next step.

5. Explore the Impact

Once you have described the events of the meeting, give people the opportunity to understand the impact of their actions and behavior on each other. At the heart of a person’s effectiveness in group interaction is their understanding of how they influence or impact others. Simply ask the parties involved, “I’m curious, what do you think of what I’ve just said?” or “Does that work for you, folks?” Then pause and wait for their response.

Exploring impact is about building a mutual understanding. It is not about getting everyone to agree on one experience for the group, but rather to get everyone to understanding how different people experience the actions and behaviors of the group. Remind your group, understanding does not equal agreement. There can often be some very authentic and meaningful conversations when exploring impact. It is essential that the group have an understanding of what’s going on before moving onto addressing the issue.

6. Plan for Change

Usually, simply holding up the mirror to the group is all it takes for them to get back on track. Once you bring the observation to their attention, they can remedy the situation and continue the pursuit of their meeting objective. Try asking the group, “How do you want to proceed from here? What do you need to do differently? How should we modify the approach?”

I used to think that I needed to have the answers to all that ailed the groups I worked with. I soon realized how futile that perspective was. Why? First, I couldn't possibly have all the answers. Secondly, by engaging group members in understanding the dynamics, they were much more committed to figuring their own way out of the problems. My role became much less stressful and my effectiveness increased dramatically as my client-groups took much more responsibility for figuring out how to best work together. A student of mine once observed, “The answers are in the room.” Most groups have amazing ability and skill that lies untapped and underutilized. Give them a chance to do it themselves.

At times, however, the group will require more assistance, or perhaps you see a particular approach that would serve the group well. Offer it to the group as a suggestion, “Have any of you used a decision matrix? It could be quite helpful here.” Leaving the choice with the group is a central principle in facilitation. With choice, people develop greater commitment to and ownership of what they are doing.

7. Re-start the meeting

The group is now ready to continue with the work at hand. You can now revert to observing the group, until the next intervention is needed.