THE ART OF FACILITATIVE LEADERSHIP: MAXIMIZING OTHERS' CONTRIBUTIONS

BY JEFFREY CUFAUDE

Leadership traditionally has been thought of as "doing the right thing" while management has been defined as "doing things right." Contemporary leadership combines these two distinctions with an emphasis on "doing the right thing . . . right." As Jim Collins and Jerry Porras noted in the seminal work, *Built to Last* (HarperBusiness, 1994), no longer can effective leaders frame choices in dualistic either-or frameworks; rather they must learn to embrace the *and*, considering both *what* needs to be done and *how* that choice can best be implemented. But no one individual, however talented or knowledgeable, can single-handedly lead an organization to success. In order to advance their organizations' efforts, leaders must be able to actively engage others so their talents and contributions are fully leveraged.

How can they do so? Using facilitation skills. Effective facilitation involves using processes and tools to maximize the collective intelligence of individuals in a group to determine the right course of action and to then build a template for acting on the choices they make. Facilitation, while long associated with individuals leading workshops, planning meetings, or other group processes, actually encompasses a broad mix of consulting and coaching skills that are too critical to be relegated to the domain of a select few.

In today's organizations, individuals at all levels need to possess facilitation skills. By necessity, people are making decisions collaboratively in consultation with others. More work is being completed in cross-functional teams and through internal or external partnerships than ever before. But this need for greater collaboration comes at a time when the diversity of perspectives, talents, and cultures present in the workplace is increasing. Achieving better results by tapping into this mix is a goal that can be accomplished through effective application of facilitative leadership fundamentals (see "Facilitative Leadership Fundamentals").

The good news? Facilitation is a skill that almost all individuals can master and add to their overall portfolio of leadership skills.

The Essence of Facilitative Leadership

The essence of facilitative leadership can be summarized in six major themes:

• *Facilitative leaders make connections and help others make meaning.* In a fast-paced environment overloaded with information, people need to be able to connect on a variety of levels: with their colleagues, with the issues at hand, and with the lessons from the past and the potential of the future. Facilitative leaders listen for and seek to make (or help others make) the connection between what is occurring in a conversation and what has occurred in other places or at other times. For example, they might ask how a current decision under deliberation might affect operations in another area. Effective facilitation involves periodically asking the question, "How does this discussion connect with others we have been having or to what someone else is doing?"

Facilitative leaders also seek to connect comments made by various

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FACILITATIVE LEADERSHIP FUNDAMENTALS

Facilitative leaders:

• Use active listening skills including paraphrasing, summarizing, reflecting, and questioning.

• Encourage and generate participative discussion in groups.

• Help stimulate creative thinking through brainstorming and other idea-generation processes.

• Stimulate strategic consideration of alternatives and informed decision-making of appropriate choices.

• Manage contrasting perspectives and opinions that might result in conflict among members of a group.

• Intervene with individuals and groups without taking total control of the situation.

• Design meeting processes to accomplish a wide range of goals and objectives.

• Draw out others' opinions in an objective and nonjudgmental manner.

• Support teams in various stages of group development.

• Help individuals and groups reflect on their experiences and capture relevant learning.

• Lead or design inclusive group processes that honor individuals' different learning and participation styles.

• Help shape more powerful and strategic questions for exploration.

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individuals in a meeting. Because facilitation involves deep and active listening, leaders who have developed these skills likely have an overall sense of the links among disparate threads of conversation. They help group members make these correlations, as well as identify the meaning behind what is occurring, by posing expansive, open-ended questions that invite others into the discussion.

Such leaders create a reflective space for individuals and groups where they can make sense of what is transpiring and capture real-time learning about both what they are doing and how they are doing it. They slow the conversation down periodically, and invite the group to assess the nature of the deliberations and how they can be enhanced: "How are we doing what we are doing?" Facilitative leaders help others understand that the diversity present in the group is likely to yield different meanings that can coexist peacefully alongside each other without any one perspective needing to win. In sum, leaders who exercise these skills work with others to achieve synergy, producing a group result that surpasses what any individual might have achieved on his or her own.

• *Facilitative leaders provide direction without totally taking the reins.* When group members do not share ownership of decisions and their outcomes, they are less likely to follow through on commitments. Too often, individuals abdicate their responsibility to the leader; that is, they fail to acknowledge that ensuring a group's effectiveness is the responsibility of all members. In order for groups to realize their full potential, every individual must be concerned with the good of the whole. For this reason, facilitative leaders more often *ask* rather than *tell* groups what they need to be doing and *help them move forward* rather than *control* their movement.

In his classic work, *Facilitation* (McGraw-Hill, 1995), Trevor Bentley noted that facilitative leaders position themselves differently vis-à-vis the group, depending on the situation. They lead from the *front* during a group's early stages of development, when participants need to clarify their

shared purpose and benefit from having a structure that connects them to the group's work and to each other. As a group develops and members take more responsibility for directing its activities, the leader becomes just another voice, serving *alongside* the other members. Finally, when a group reaches higher stages of performance, the facilitative leader contributes from *behind*, offering insights and observations that add to the team's evolving momentum.

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• *Facilitative leaders balance managing content and process.* Individuals using a facilitative approach are concerned with both *what* the group is discussing or deciding and *how* they are actually doing it. They appreciate and understand that the team may need to use different processes to achieve different desired outcomes. An important part of these efforts involves thoughtfully considering how the group might reach a certain result.

Facilitative leaders often work with group members to establish shared agreements for how participants will interact with each other and do their work, that is, the group process aspect of their efforts. The group then uses these agreements as guidelines for discussions and as evaluation criteria for how well they are accomplishing their charge: "We've made some significant decisions today. When you reflect on the conversations that led to them, how well did we do on the agreements we established earlier?"

Sometimes group process is dismissed as "soft stuff" that keeps teams from the real work of making decisions. But individuals want others to consider their perspectives and to solicit and appreciate their contributions and ideas. As a result, individuals leading groups and teams must appro-

priately balance attention to content and process.

• *Facilitative leaders invite disclosure and feedback to help surface unacknowledged or invisible beliefs, thoughts, and patterns.* Call it what you want—the dead cow on the table, the elephant in the middle of the room, or the skunk smelling up the place—most groups have certain topics they need to discuss in order to move forward on key decisions and efforts. Facilitative leaders work with individuals and groups to identify and discuss the important issues they may be unaware of or unwilling to address. These may be issues that are perceived as being too "hot" or fraught with potential conflict to be brought into the open.

Facilitative leaders understand that the greatest risk is when a group avoids dealing with the truth, when individuals speak in glossy abstractions of reality so as not to rock the boat. To overcome this tendency, they frequently invite participants to step back and examine what's not being said that needs to be brought into the discussions: "When you think of what we want to accomplish today, what are the questions or issues we need to discuss that have yet to surface?" The more that work groups learn to address issues openly and honestly, the more productive their relationships and work activity will become.

By attending to the relationships among individuals in a group and the natural dynamics that unfold as they work with each other, facilitative leaders increase people's comfort in engaging in open and honest dialogue. Individuals feel supported in making statements that previously would have been considered too difficult to share, such as opinions that run counter to conventional wisdom or the perspective of those holding the greatest power. They learn to communicate in a respectful manner how others' behaviors are affecting them and their work. They become comfortable revealing their own observations or perceptions and inviting their colleagues to do the same.

In this manner, feedback becomes

a routine part of the group's conversations as opposed to something that gets saved up and shared only selectively. The facilitative leader adeptly manages both feedback and disclosure (as defined in the Johari Window model developed by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham, 1969) so that group members make more information public and discuss it respectfully and thoughtfully.

• *Facilitative leaders focus on building the capacity of individuals and groups to accomplish more on their own, now and in the future.* Facilitative leadership is not just about the immediate task. It is also about helping a group or team learn together so they might become more productive in the future. Similarly, when coaching an individual employee, a facilitative leader focuses not only on dealing with the employee's immediate need but also with laying a foundation for future strong performance.

This long-term definition of success helps keep facilitative leaders from assuming too much responsibility for a group. Doing so could leave group members unable to manage future efforts without the leader's involvement. To prevent such dependence from developing, facilitative leaders regularly engage groups in debriefing their meetings and projects to determine what lessons can be learned and what adjustments need to be made in the distribution of responsibilities.

Leaders who operate in this way also understand that group agreements and structure may need to change as the work itself or the environment in which it is being done changes. They see structure as a means to an end not as the end itself or a turf to be protected at all costs. Such leaders frequently ask group members, "Are we best organized to accomplish our desired results given the current environment in which we operate?" Engaging in this process allows individuals to see boundaries between departments, positions, and functional areas as permeable, something that must be regularly evaluated for their impact and effectiveness.

• *Facilitative leaders operate from a position of restraint.* Because facilitative leaders want to maximize others' contributions, they tend to operate first from a position of restraint, carefully measuring what, if any, action they need to take. Exercising this kind of discretion helps them avoid the "heroic leader" syndrome describe by Roger L. Martin in his book *The Responsibility Virus* (Basic Books, 2002): "When leaders assume 'heroic' responsibility for making the critical choices facing their organizations, when their reaction to problems is to go it alone, work harder, do more, to be more heroic still, with no collaboration and sharing of the leadership burden, their 'heroism' is often their undoing."

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Trevor Bentley offers a continuum with three categories of interventions available for the facilitative leader: *gentle, persuasive, and forceful or directive. Gentle* interventions include doing nothing, offering silence or support, or asking questions to clarify. *Persuasive* interventions involve asking questions to move the group or offering suggested choices, paths, or actions. *Forceful* interventions reflect a higher degree of involvement and include offering guidance, choosing for the group, or directing the group.

Some misinterpret the continuum, believing that a facilitative leader should never offer persuasive or directive interventions. But should an emergency siren go off during a group meeting, I doubt anyone is looking to clarify the range of options available to them through some nominal group process, thoughtfully flesh out the pros and cons of each option, elicit a choice from the group, and then run that choice through deBono's Six Hat Thinking Method. No, participants would be very comfortable with following a directive from the leader!

What the continuum does illustrate is the range of options available to a facilitative leader at all times. The wise leader understands the consequences of the intervention she might choose and does not unnecessarily move deeper into the continuum unless doing so advances the group's capacity. She carefully and deliberately selects how to intervene and at what level. Simply moving one step back on the continuum can often allow a group to retain more control over its own efforts. Notice the difference between "I think we should move on" and "Are we ready to move on?" The latter allows for much more choice from the group itself. Facilitative leaders do not make choices for others that either (1) they do not need to make or (2) that rightfully do not belong to them.

Making the Commitment

Every person can adopt the role and lens of a facilitator in their interactions with others. Making a commitment to act in this way, however, needs to be done thoughtfully. Authenticity is one of the hallmarks of the effective facilitator. As the Sufi philosopher Rumi says, "If you are unfaithfully with us, you are causing terrible damage." Appropriating a few techniques learned in a workshop or from a book without truly incorporating them into your overall leadership identify will cause them to be seen and experienced as insincere or manipulative.

In a world in which technology allows almost everything to be copied and widely distributed, our authentic self is the one thing that really can't be copied. Failing to bring who we are to what we do commoditizes our individuality and denies the unique style and contributions we bring to our individual relationships, the communities of which we are part, and the organizations and stakeholders we serve. Facilitative leaders model their genuine selves for others and help create the space that honors the diversity and genuineness present in any group (see "The Facilitative Leader's Gifts" on p. 5).

Because authenticity is rarely ostentatious and seldom calls attention to itself, it is experienced by others as natural and genuine. When others comment favorably on some aspect of

our authenticity, we are often bemused, because the quality they noted is so much a part of who we are that we would not know how to be any other way. As G. Ross Lawford notes in *The Quest for Authentic Power: Getting Past Manipulation, Control, and Self-Limiting Beliefs* (Berrett-Koehler, 2002), "The power of authenticity is quietly efficient and confidently effective." Facilitative leaders not only help others *tell* the truth because of their leadership style and interventions, they help others *be* the truth.

Any time we choose to alter the normal style most individuals would associate with our work, we need to be sensitive to how that change might be perceived and received. If your colleagues see you as a real "take charge" type of person, they might question your intentions if you suddenly shift to a strongly facilitative stance. Rather than changing overnight, gradually introduce new leadership skills and facilitation behaviors in your regular interactions with others. For instance, when you find yourself about to tell someone or a group what to do, pull back a bit and ask a thoughtful ques-

tion that might help them discover for themselves what most needs to be done. When you need to coach an employee on a job-specific issue, make sure to probe if other relevant issues are what actually need to be discussed.

Professional literature often draws rigid lines between leadership and management, seeming to suggest that one is right and one is wrong. In reality, organizations need individuals who both do the right thing and are

capable of doing things right. They need people who can help individuals and groups do the right things right —the very nature of facilitative leadership. ◘

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THE FACILITATIVE LEADER'S GIFTS

While facilitative leaders offer organizations many valuable skills and talents, their most important contributions often come from their ability to help individuals and organizations do the following:

• Accept and value silence, staying in a reflective mode beyond the normal comfort zone.

• Move from advocacy to inquiry in an effort to enhance the dialogue.

• Clarify their inferences by returning to the observations that led to them.

• Believe that everyone holds a piece of the truth.

• See conflict between ideas as normal and healthy.

• Honor individual perspectives and explore the value of minority viewpoints.

• Clarify their mental models and the assumptions that are influencing their thinking.

• Expand their sense of the possibilities through creative thinking before jumping into action with critical and constructive thinking.