



Meeting Doctor

facilitator

The Meeting Doctor (MD) aims to address key issues that occur during meetings either from a relationship, management, task, and/or process perspective. It's purpose is to provide prescriptions on how to improve meeting effectiveness with the understanding that there are other, equally good prescriptions available.

By Michael Goldman

Dear MD,

I was recently approached by one of my colleagues who asked me to 'facilitate' her next meeting. I reluctantly agreed, but decided to do it in the end as a personal challenge to myself. Well I was given the agenda and told that I was responsible for 'facilitating' a couple of the items. After the meeting my colleague gave me feedback and claimed that I hadn't facilitated, but rather 'chaired' the items. I'm still really confused with terms 'facilitator' and 'chairperson'. Perhaps you could help shed some light on these terms for me.

Sincerely,

Term-inally Confused

Dear TC:

Having trained and facilitated for many years, I indeed empathize with your confusion between chairing and facilitating. This is a common question arising during workshops and meeting management. Borrowing from my colleague Ingrid Bens' book *Facilitating with Ease!*, (Jossey-Bass Pfeiffer) to understand the differences between Chair and Facilitator it is first important to distinguish the notion of 'process' versus 'content'.

In every interaction, whether it's a meeting or a consultation or even a discussion between just two people, there are always two things going on. One is the content, and the other is the process.

Content

The Content of any interaction is what is being discussed. This is the task before the group and is expressed in the agenda, the issues, the problems, the decisions and the ideas that get discussed. This is the tangible part of the meeting that most people are aware of. That's because it's verbal, typically occurring in the form of 'words' either spoken or in written form.

Chairs typically direct and get into content. Traditionally, chairs dictate what is to be discussed following 'Parliamentary Rules of Order'. For this reason, chairs are not perceived

as being 'neutral'. It's typical for a chair to express bias through his/her words or through non-verbal means (i.e. body language, intonation), whereas 'facilitators' are expected to be neutral and objective. Neutrality means not getting in to the 'content' of the discussion, but rather relying on the group to decide the extent and depth of what needs to be discussed. Facilitators create rules from within the group, rather than imposing rules from a book.

When it comes to making decisions, facilitators believe in the power of the group and the resulting impact on commitment levels. Facilitators seek equal participation of all members when their input is needed to decide on issues. The facilitator sees themselves responsible for ensuring the group makes the best quality decision that it can, therefore necessitating the facilitator to probe, make suggestions and at rare times, 'take off the facilitator's hat'. Nevertheless, the final decision is ultimately the group's responsibility. Chairs, on the other hand, may influence decisions and concentrate power. It's not uncommon for a strong chairperson to make final decisions on important items or terminate a meeting or agenda without seeking the meeting participants' consent. A consequence of this self-delegated decision option is often that the chair 'owns' the outcome rather than the constituents whose commitment is required.

or chairperson?

Process

On the other hand there is another important intangible side to every interaction, namely Process. This refers to how the meeting or interaction is or will be managed. Process refers to all of the non-verbal aspects of the interaction. This is what we call the “music”. The ‘process’ is split in to two interdependent foci, ‘task management’ and ‘relationship management’.

Task management requires methods, procedures and/or format for sequencing steps that successfully initiate and ultimately create closure on a discussion. Such an example could include a sequence of steps that begin with identifying issues that ‘stop a department from being effective’, to prioritizing and resolving those issues. Chairs often dictate process or the ‘how’ and ‘when’ content is brought to the table, whereas facilitators suggest process and seek ratification and/or possible changes from the group.

Having a meeting agenda would be the first step in ensuring meeting structure and both chair and facilitator insist on this. However, how each agenda item is managed is another story. Facilitators structure the steps for managing each item, and if they’re worth their weight, possess a keen sense of design in order to ensure a conversation progresses logically. Chairs often lack a deliberate structure for managing agenda items. This may be due to lack of tool knowledge on the part of the facilitator or a method to retain power and control over how the meeting progresses. It is not uncommon to witness a chair item with or without the consent of others.

Relationship management seeks requires methods, procedures and tools for managing how

group members interact with one another. This depends on the style of the leader which in turn impacts the spirit and climate of the meeting. A ‘command and control’ style can easily shut down a group within minutes. Facilitators seek to empower meeting members and intervene when group dynamics are hindering task progression or productivity. They intervene when members become dysfunctional and appreciate that in the process of collaboration, group members naturally become ‘stormy’ in reaching a consensus. Chairs often will terminate discussion and avoid debate or closure with member-to-member arguments. Not allowing members to vent and to openly resolve their issues may leave members resentful resulting in less impactful decisions, recommendations, feedback, etc.

My Perspective

Yet, though I appear to be biased to Facilitators over Chairs (that’s an understatement!), each has its strengths and its place. From my perspective, the purpose of meetings is to provide a forum for enabling people to bring their collective ideas to the table in the hopes of obtaining a mutually agreed outcome. Chairing is most useful at the start of a meeting in order to go over minutes, share information and manage a round-robin report-back by members. A very common role arrangement is to have a meeting leader use a

chair approach to start the meeting, deal with the agenda, housekeeping and information-sharing portions of the session, then switch to a facilitator approach to get feedback from the group, problem-solve or make decisions.

All good facilitators should know when and how to act as an effective chairperson. Conversely, it

would be ideal if all chairpersons were also skilled facilitators, who could switch styles when they seek participation and ownership.

With some planning beforehand, these roles don’t need to conflict. The key is to be clear about when each approach should be used.

In summary:

Chair when you want to ...

Facilitate when you want to ...

Welcome all members and overview the meeting objectives and management and/or organizational expectations increase participation to set the parameters around the discussion shift ownership and commitment levels review past minutes and agenda items have members problem-solve overview current agenda deal with group dynamics exchange information facilitate an intervention that will improve meeting or team effectiveness hear members report back get members to make decisions get informal feedback get members to create action plans.

Michael Goldman co-facilitates the highly impactful “Team Leadership and Facilitation” program at The Banff Centre. He runs his own team facilitation company called “Participative Dynamics” based in Toronto.