Facilitating Teams

A friend of ours who does facilitation professionally was kind enough to put together some of his "wisdom" about facilitating teams. We hope this will help you in your work with your own teams.

Toward Effective Facilitation by George D'Iorio

Facilitating a team can be quite a challenge, but it can also be very rewarding. In approaching this challenge it is important to remember that the facilitator provides the process through which the team develops the content. So, the facilitator cannot offer answers or solutions, but by guiding them through an effective process they can help the team make progress toward their goals.

Effective Team Process

An effective team process is one that leverages the strengths of the individual members into a results the individuals would not have achieved individually. This is sometimes referred to as synergy, where the results of the whole (the team) is greater than the sum of its parts (individual members). The key is to get participation from every member, keep them focused on the goal, and guide them by way of a formula or process, but not by providing actual content. We can accomplish this by using various techniques that are easily learned and can be readily applied.

3 Basic Process Techniques

There are many process techniques to facilitate teams, but the following 3 basic techniques are recommended for those who are building facilitation skills. These techniques can be used in the phases a team goes through in its normal progress toward reaching solutions or determining actions. In the use of these techniques it is recommended that 'public recording' be used so that the team can see their ideas and progress toward their goal. Most commonly, this is achieved through the use of a whiteboard or 'flipcharts' and colored markers.

Brainstorming

The most straightforward technique for gathering ideas is brainstorming. The idea is to collect as many ideas as possible in a short period of time. You can go around the group in 'round robin' fashion to make sure everyone participates evenly. Capturing the ideas and posting them on flip charts on the wall helps the group see the progress they are making. There is one rule in brainstorming: every idea is a good idea. Simply write them all down without discussion and in a few minutes you can have 20 or 30 good ideas. Stop when the group runs out of steam or you sense that the quality of the ideas is waning.

Facilitated Discussion

After gathering these ideas, it is a good idea to try to eliminate duplicate ideas, combine ideas that are related, and trim off ideas that might not move the team toward its goal. You can do this by explaining this objective to the team and then simply guide them through a discussion of the ideas. This discussion might even lead to adding a few new ideas to the list. Ask questions about the ideas to stimulate the group. For example:

Does everyone understand this idea the way it is written?
How does this idea help us solve our problem?
Is this idea one that we can combine with something else on our list?
Can we expand on this idea to make it better?

Multi-voting

This technique is most effective when you have a large list of ideas that you need to boil down to 5 or 10. With your ideas posted on the walls, you simply give everyone a certain number of 'votes'. Each team member gets 10 post-it notes which they can use to 'vote' for the ideas they like best. After everyone has voted, the votes are tabulated and the ideas with the highest number of votes are the ones the team will consider as its final solution. If one solution is clearly the 'favorite' you can stop right there, or you can do another round of voting to 'pick' the final answer. You may want to have an in-depth discussion about the ideas prior to the 'final' round. Sometimes the top 2 votegetters can be combined to make an even better solution.

Quick tips for facilitating:

Explain the process/technique before diving in Maintain impartiality toward ideas Keep the process moving Make sure everyone is involved, especially quieter members Ask probing questions if an idea is not clearly stated Paraphrase if needed to clarify an idea Encourage divergent views Summarize before moving on to the next step/technique Remember that facilitation is an art and it takes time and practice to perfect techniques. With new teams the challenge is even greater because the members are still trying to learn how to relate to each other. If the group is struggling with this you may want use the first 5 minutes of every session to 'break the ice'. This can be a simple guessing game or practicing brainstorming something totally unrelated to your actual goals. (Example: lets make a list of all the 'cats' you can think of. Remember ALL IDEAS are good and encourage crazy ideas).

There are entire books devoted to 'Icebreaking' activities that can help get your team working together through games. Just ask at your local bookstore for books like 'Games Trainers Play'. There are also many books on facilitation skills. One book that is especially recommended for new facilitators is 'The Art of Facilitation', by Dale Hunter. It currently sells for $14.36 at Amazon.com and is 256 pages in length. Books such as these offer great advice and insight into how to get teams working together more effectively. Above all, keep your team focused and positive and make sure you guide their progress toward their goals. By doing that, and by encouraging their participation, you will have an excellent chance to facilitate their success.