THE TEN PRINCIPLES OF FACILITATION: A FACILITATOR'S METHODOLOGY

Leadership Strategies
The Facilitation Company

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A facilitated session is a highly-structured meeting in which the meeting leader (the facilitator) guides the participants through a series of pre-defined steps to arrive at a result that is created, understood and accepted by all participants.

In Michael Wilkinson's authoritative book on facilitation, *The Secrets of Facilitation,* he shares more than 50 secrets to effective facilitating. Here we want to share one of the most essential secrets – in fact, the fundamental secret:

You can achieve more effective results when solutions are created, understood and accepted by the people impacted. If they create it, they understand it and they accept it.

In his book Transforming the Mature Information Technology Organization, Dr. Robert Zawacki from the University of Colorado put the secret this way:

ED = RD x CD

That is, **E**ffective **D**ecisions = The **R**ight **D**ecision <u>times</u> **C**ommitment to the **D**ecision. Dr. Zawacki's point is that the multiplication sign in the formula means that even the best decision can be rendered completely ineffective if commitment to the decision is lacking. A group of consultants might have created the 100% solution for the Sanitation Bureau, but if the workers did not buy-in to the solution, the effectiveness of the solution would have been near zero.

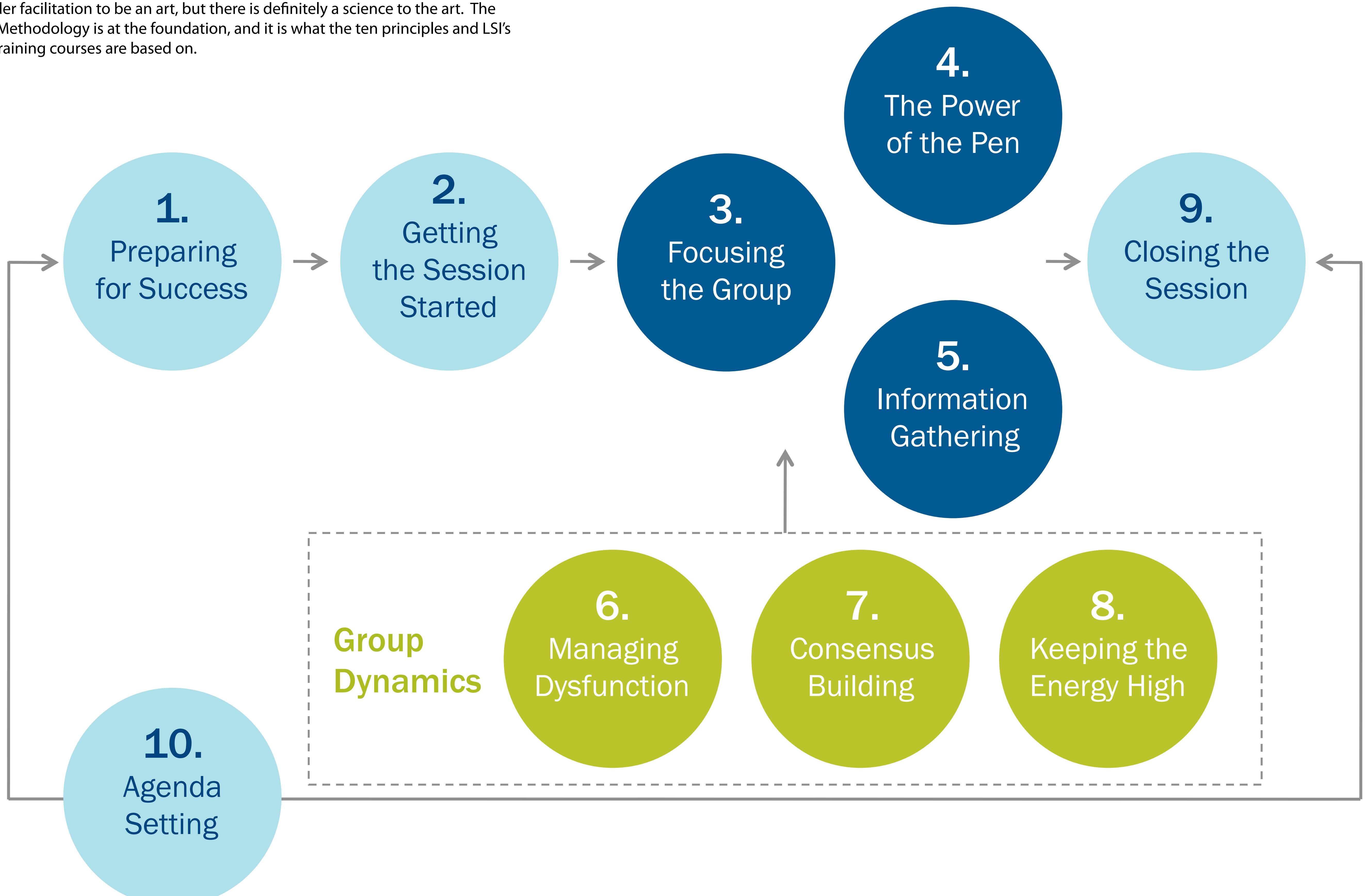
Many know the secret. Yet few truly understand how to apply it and how to unleash the power that comes with getting people together to develop solutions that will work for them. For example, few understand –

- How to get people excited about participating in a solution process
- How to keep them focused and engaged
- How to ask questions that challenge without alienating
- How to guide a group without overpowering them
- How to address disagreements and build consensus
- How to deal with people who drop out, dominate, or demonstrate other dysfunctional behaviors that can be disruptive
- How to ensure you gain commitment to action

That's why we created The Facilitator's Methodology: The Ten Principles of Facilitation. Following these ten principles allows professional facilitators to hit their mark every time and subject matter experts who lead sessions and meetings to easily follow a proven and repeatable methodology for leading groups to consensus.

The Facilitation Cycle

Many consider facilitation to be an art, but there is definitely a science to the art. The Facilitator's Methodology is at the foundation, and it is what the ten principles and LSI's facilitation training courses are based on.



DEVELOPING THE TEN PRINCIPLES

Supporting the ten principles are specific techniques that demonstrate how to execute the principles in practice. Some are covered here in this eBook, and the rest are taught in our training courses. Together, the principles and techniques comprise a comprehensive facilitation methodology that produces consistent, repeatable results.

Facilitation works. You **will** achieve more effective results when solutions are created, understood and accepted by the people impacted. You **will** be more successful, have more effective meetings, and gain better results in management situations. There is still much for us all to learn about the science of facilitation. Hopefully, this book will help you learn the secrets that Smart Facilitators already know for achieving consistent, repeatable results through facilitation.

1. Preparing for Success - Cover all the bases

You have been asked to lead a meeting with the executives of the organization to address three critical barriers to growth. It is essential to the organization's future (and your career development) that this session be highly successful.

2. Getting the Session Started - Inform, excite, empower, involve

During our interviews with the veteran facilitators, we learned that the opening of any facilitated session is so critical; we dedicated an entire principle to the first fifteen minutes. During this time you set the stage for everything that follows. Start poorly, and you are fighting an uphill battle.

3. Focusing the Group - Establish the course; avoid detours

Principles 3, 4 and 5 make up what we call the facilitation cycle. For every agenda item in a facilitated session, you must focus the group (Principle 3), use the power of the pen (Principle 4) and perform information gathering (Principle 5). When you are done with the first agenda item, you go back to focusing the group (Principle 3) and go through the cycle for the second agenda item, and so on, until all agenda items are covered.

4. The Power of the Pen - Use it, don't abuse it, make it theirs

Most facilitators aren't aware that they can drive a group dysfunctional simply by abusing the pen. Often facilitators unintentionally devalue a participant's comments by NOT recording a remark with which they disagree or waiting until the remark is validated by other people. Other times, they reword the participant's comment, then record the reworded version (tacitly implying that the original words were not good enough!) In time, the group can lose complete ownership over the recorded comments simply because the comments aren't theirs, but instead the facilitator's.

5. Information Gathering - Know your tools and how to use them

Facilitators must have a wealth of tools at their disposal in order to address a variety of needs. The most important tool for a facilitator is questioning. Rather than knowing just open- and closed-ended questioning techniques, a Smart facilitator has nine different questioning tools.

6. Managing Dysfunction - Conscious Prevention, Early Detection, Clean Resolution

How do you deal with someone who is constantly saying, "No, that won't work…The one you're talking about now, we tried before, and it's a bad idea… No, not practical, not realistic, won't work here?" What about the people who want to dominate the discussion? Or - just the opposite - the people who sit there and say nothing, until they go out the door and then say how much a waste of time the meeting was?

Most facilitators fear dysfunctional behavior and seek a wealth of techniques to address it should it occur. Smart Facilitators know that the key to dysfunction is to address it before it occurs (conscious prevention), detect it early if it does happen (early detection) and cleanly resolve it so that it goes away for good (clean resolution).

7. Consensus Building - Create and maintain a consensus-focused process

Smart Facilitators know that people disagree for only three reasons. As facilitators, it is our job to create an environment in which consensus is the goal and identifying and resolving sources of disagreement is seen as a vehicle for achieving the goal. When disagreements occur, we must recognize why people are disagreeing and be able to apply the appropriate consensus building strategy based on the source of the disagreement.

8. Keeping the Energy High - Set the pace, anticipate the lulls, react accordingly

Whether you are leading a single two-hour meeting or a series of half-day meetings, high energy is essential to keeping the group's interest and engagement.

9. Closing The Session - Review, evaluate, end, debrief

Often meetings end without a clear understanding of what was accomplished, what decisions were made, etc. Smart Facilitators know that in closing a session it is important that everyone is clear on what was done, the benefits of what was done, the actions to take place once the meeting is over, and the method for ensuring that the actions were accomplished.

10. Agenda Setting - Adapt your agenda to address the need

The tenth principle ends at the beginning with constructing agendas that incorporate the other nine principles.

Now that you've been introduced to all ten of the principles, let's take it one step further and uncover some key concepts about each principle.

PRINCIPLE 1

Preparing for Success - Cover all the bases

What does it take to be prepared for a facilitated session? Expert facilitators know that whether they are preparing for running a task force meeting, delivering a presentation or meeting with a customer, the secret to preparation is the same: they must achieve a clear understanding of the "5 Ps."

The 5 Ps of Preparation

- The "**Purpose**" explains the overall aim. *Why are we holding this session?*

  Whether you are designing a conference, giving a speech or planning a vacation, it is important to have a clearly stated purpose that is shared by all involved. When purpose is unclear or not shared, it is easy for an activity to go astray.

- The "**Product**" defines the items that must be produced to achieve the purpose. *What do we want to have when we are done?*

  Identifying the desired product allows you to transform what might be a highly nebulous purpose statement into a set of distinct deliverables that define achievement of the purpose.

- The "**Participants**" identifies the people who need to be involved. *Who are the participants and what are their perspectives?*

  These three key questions can help an organization determine the right people to have engaged in a group process:

  - Who are the people who will be impacted by the decision?
  - What level of involvement should they have in the process?
  - Whose perspectives, involvement, and buy-in are so critical that they should be at the table or represented by someone who is?

- The "**Probable Issues**" defines the concerns that will likely arise. *What are the probable issues that will need to be addressed?*

  Most organizations have their share of potentially challenging issues that can come up during a facilitated session. To be fully prepared, you must work to define any probable issues that could have an impact on the success of the session. Meeting with the sponsor and a selected participants in a management briefing before the session can help you do this.

- The "**Process**" details the steps that will be taken to create the product, taking into account the Participants and Probable Issues. *How will we go about achieving the purpose, given the product desired, the participants and the probable issues we will face?*

  A process is simply a series of steps to arrive at a result. If purpose is the steering wheel of a car, process is the engine. Whereas purpose sets the direction, process gets you to your destination. Your agenda is the tool you will use to manage your process.

PRINCIPLE 2

Getting the Session Started - Inform, excite, empower, involve

Opening the Session

How you start a facilitated session is critical to the overall success of the session. Conventional wisdom states that a good meeting should start with the agenda. The reason typically given is that the agenda answers the question, "What are we going to do?" However, the reality is that participants in a facilitated session need answers to several questions **before** the agenda is discussed:

- Why are we having this session?
- What do we need to have accomplished when we are done?
- What is our role in the decision-making?
- Why should I invest the time?

The opening sets the tone, pace and expectation for the rest of the day. Your opening words should cover four key points: inform, excite, empower and involve (IEEI). You may consider using the IEEI as an outline for your opening.

IEEI

- **Inform** the participants about the overall purpose of the meeting through the **session objective**.

  This involves participants immediately and lets them know that their needs and desires are being considered. It also provides an opportunity to adjust the agenda if flexibility is possible

- **Excite** them about the process by giving them a clear vision of the overall **result** to be achieved and **the benefits** to them.

  A common facilitation mistake is spending critical beginning time on ground rules, introductions and letting people know the location of the bathrooms. While important, these are not the vital points that engage participants and get them committed to achieving the session purpose. Excite them with two to four sentences benefits they will realize by achieving results.

- **Empower** them by discussing the important r**ole they play** in the process, the reason they were selected or the authority that has been given to them.

- **Involve** them as early as possible by identifying their **personal objectives**, the issues that must be covered, the challenges that must be overcome or some other topic that contributes to the overall goal of the session.

Tip: For maximum impact memorize your opening statement so you can focus on establishing rapport with the group through eye contact, movement, gestures and other presentation techniques.

PRINCIPLE 3

Focusing the Group: Establish the course, avoid detours

Now that you have the group informed, excited, empowered and involved, how do you get them focused and keep them focused? How do you prevent the group from going off on long, unproductive detours? There are multiple tools you can use. Here is one of our favorites:

Using Checkpoints

At the beginning of every agenda item and facilitated process, it is important to take a checkpoint by doing the following:

- **Review** – Review quickly what has been done to date.
- **Preview** – Describe briefly what the group is about to do.
- **Big View** – Explain how the previewed agenda item fits into the overall objective of the session.

Why is a checkpoint necessary? The checkpoint serves to ensure that all participants are aware that a transition is taking place, and helps them understand how the process they are about to undertake relates to has been done and the overall session purpose.

Facilitators tend to be fairly good at the review and preview parts of a checkpoint. Unfortunately, we tend to leave out the key component, the big view. The big view explains why the step is important and why the participants should invest their time in the step. The big view should always tie back to the overall session objective by explaining how this step contributes to the session purpose.

Tip: If a single agenda item has more than one facilitated process, you should use more than one checkpoint.

PRINCIPLE 4

The Power of the Pen: Use it don't abuse it, make it theirs

The documentation from a facilitated session is the official record of the results of the meeting. The facilitator has a big responsibility to ensure that participants agree with the documentation of the session before the session ends. Be sure to get agreement from the participants that the information you record during the session is accurate as you go along. Participants tend to pay closer attention to ensuring that all key information is recorded. After the session, have the notes transcribed, edited and distributed to all participants.

What should be documented in a session?

1. Decisions made during the session
2. Actions assigned during the session
3. Outstanding issues as a result of the session
4. Relevant analysis and comments made during the session.

The Power of the Pen

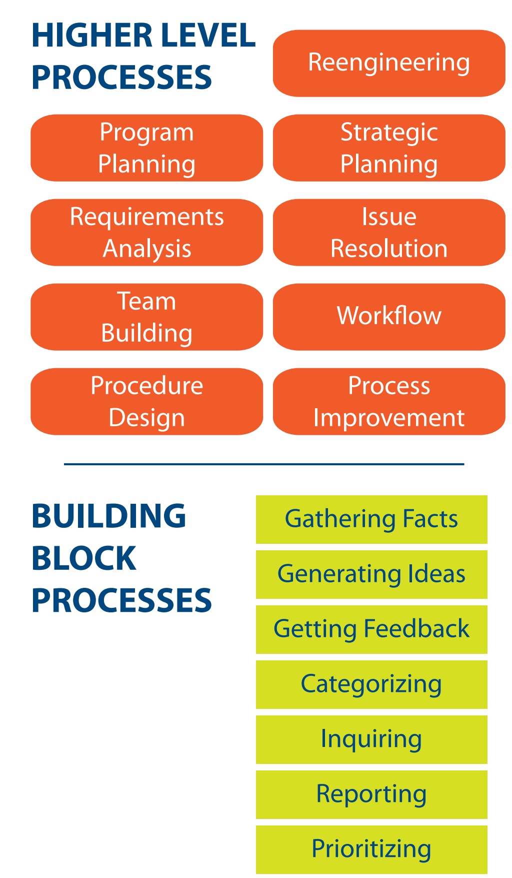
Few facilitators truly understand the power of the pen. When facilitators don't record what participants say or when facilitators record their own words and not the words of the participants, we are abusing the power of the pen. As evidenced by the public safety case study that started this section, a facilitator can drive participants dysfunctional simply by abusing the pen. Abuse of the pen can very easily lead to participants dropping out, participants arguing with the facilitator, participants not buying into the overall result.

Tip: It can be helpful to have someone else do the writing while you facilitate. Using a scribe Using a scribe reduces the load on the facilitator and has the added advantage of allowing the facilitator to maintain greater eye contact and greater physical proximity to the group.

PRINCIPLE 5

Information Gathering: Know your tools and how to use them

A higher level facilitated process, such as strategic planning or process improvement, uses a series of building block processes to achieve its goals. In some cases, the participants provide information they already know. In other cases, they generate ideas. In still other cases, they categorize information or make decisions. We recommend numerous engagement strategies that support many of these information gathering activities, and over 20 of them are available here.



While there are many types of information gathering and processing activities that serve as building blocks, for our purposes we break them into seven major functions. See table to right.

Function	Sample Question	Purpose
1. Gathering Facts	How does the process work today?	To gain greater detailed information; most appropriate when there are "right" answers
2. Categorizing	What are the key groupings represented by this information?	To group information into categories for further processing
3. Inquiring	What questions do we want to see answered?	To have participants create questions or ask questions of a speaker, a panel or each other
4. Generating Ideas	What are possible ways this problem could be solved?	To create possible solutions or approaches; most appropriate when there are multiple possibilities and creativity is desired
5. Prioritizing	Which of these solutions is best?	To rank, rate or select.
6. Reporting	What did your group come up with?	To inform about results of a breakout exercise or other activity.
7. Getting Feedback	What were the strengths and weaknesses of today's session?	To evaluate the session or other experience.

PRINCIPLE 6

Closing the Session: Review, evaluate, end, debrief

All too often meetings end with many dangling loose ends. As a result of the loose ends, within a day or two, there can be differences of opinion as to what actually happened in the meeting. Sometimes the differences are so great, you are left wondering if everyone attended the same meeting!

You can achieve these outcomes by using a four-step closing sequence: review, evaluate, close and debrief. As you will see, the closing process can require as little as 10 minutes for a brief meeting and as long as 45 minutes for an all-day meeting.

- **Review** the activities performed, the participants' objectives and the parking boards (issues, decisions and actions)

  Prior to closing the session, the facilitator starts by reviewing the activities completed during the meeting. The review provides the team with a focused reminder of all that that was covered in the meeting. After reviewing the activities completed, the next step is to review the participants' personal objectives documented early in the session.

- **Evaluate** the value of the session and the results achieved

  Feedback is a critical part of the continuous improvement cycle. Strive to gain documented feedback from every session you facilitate. Be sure to encourage specific comments, whether positive or negative. Specificity tells you what you should continue to do and what you should consider changing.

- **End** by reminding of the next steps and formally ending the session

  After all of the open issues, decisions, and action items have been reviewed and the session has been evaluated, you are ready to formally end the session.

  - Thank the participants for their involvement. Remind them of the part this meeting will play in the overall objective.
  - Remind the team of the next steps, including the following:
    - Who will document the session?
    - When and how the results will be distributed?
    - The place, date, time and purpose of the next session
  - Formally end the session

- **Debrief** with the meeting sponsor to identify strengths and areas for improvement

  As soon as possible after the session, meet with the sponsor to discuss the session process and the results.

Tip: Be sure to plan adequate time for the closing

PRINCIPLE 7

Managing Dysfunction: Conscious prevention, early detection, clean resolution

Dysfunction behavior is any activity by a participant that is consciously or unconsciously a substitution for expressing displeasure with the session content or purpose, the facilitation process, or outside factors.

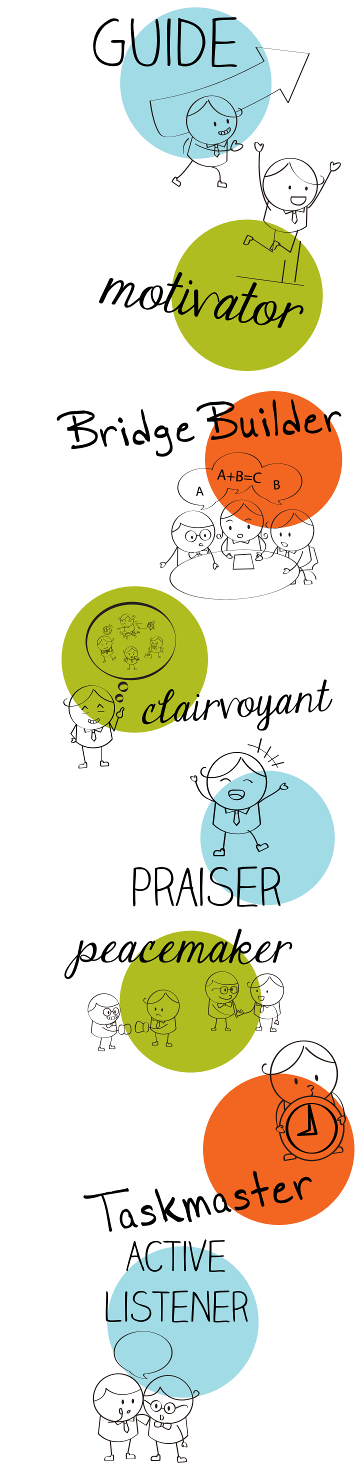
Dysfunctional behavior is a symptom, not a root cause.

This definition has three important implications.

- **Behavior is dysfunctional not people.** A person in one meeting may be actively and cooperatively participating; but in the next meeting the behavior may turn dysfunctional. In fact, the transition from functional to dysfunctional can occur in the same meeting, multiple times!
- The **dysfunctional behavior may be conscious or unconscious.** Often times, people exhibiting signs of dysfunction are not aware of the behavior. Other times, the behavior is intentional in an effort to bring about change, disruption or some other action.
- The **dysfunction is a substitution** for expressing displeasure related to the session content, process or outside factor. For example, the content issue might be that a comment was made with which the participant strongly disagrees. If the displeasure is with the process, it might be that the participant feels that the pace is too fast or that the process is getting in the way of getting to the real work. If the displeasure is an outside factor, it might be that there is an issue in the participant's personal life that has him distracted and unable to focus on the session.

As you might imagine, this is a very popular topic in our courses, so there is a lot more information we teach on dysfunction! Learn more about how to manage dysfunction, including identifying it early through our course, The Effective Facilitator.

BONUS: *Learn about each of the 8 Roles of a Facilitator here.*



PRINCIPLE 8

Building Consensus: Create and maintain a consensus-focused process

"Consensus" is a widely misunderstood concept. Many people believe that for them to be in consensus with a decision, they have to believe that the decision is the best decision. With this definition, therefore, they believe debate must continue until they convince the others or the others convince them.

The implications of this definition of consensus on organization productivity can be staggering. Allow me to explain by way of an analogy. In the US, a jury is made up of 12 people. They must all agree whether the defendant is guilty or not guilty. Often this can take multiple days. Sometimes it takes so long that they quit and declare a mistrial. In a work environment, the time it would take for that kind of consensus to be achieved on all decisions would be next to impossible.

To avoid the major investment of time and energy that 100 percent agreement on every aspect of a solution would require, we believe a different definition of consensus is more appropriate.

Consensus means: "I can live with it and I will support it."

Consensus does not mean, "I think this is the best solution." Consensus simply means, "I can live with it and I will support it through implementation."

It's important to have an arsenal of tools to use to gain consensus, like:

1. Delineation
2. Strengths and weaknesses
3. Merge
4. Weighted scoring

PRINCIPLE 9

Keeping the Energy High: Set the pace, anticipate the lulls, react accordingly

To really understand "energy" is to understand that it does three important things: it energizes the topic, engages the participants, and elevates the facilitator.

How does High Energy Energize a Topic?

When a facilitator leads a session with energy, the energy transfers to the topic. By being passionate about the topic, you are implicitly saying to the participants, "This is important to me, and it should be important to you." Your actions and your energy around the topic help energize the topic for the participants. And, just as high energy can make a topic more interesting, likewise, low energy can make a topic less interesting.

How does High Energy Engage the Participants?

For most people, high energy is just more appealing to listen to then low energy. In essence, high energy is just more fun. Of course there is a point where high energy goes "over the top," and becomes less interesting and more irritating. But short of being overdone, high energy invites participants to listen and stay alert. Unfortunately, low energy can invite participants to check out or fall asleep.

How does High Energy Elevate the Facilitator?

Energy can have a significant impact on the participants' perception of the facilitator. High energy projects confidence and low energy projects just the opposite.

Tip: Early in the session, and possibly as a ground rule, establish a simple recharge activity. The point of a recharge is to provide a simple tool for empowering participants to raise the energy level whenever needed. We call it the "Choo Choo" in our training sessions, and our participants love it. Whether it be the "Choo Choo" or something else your group calls it, get creative and have fun with it! The point is to energize.

PRINCIPLE 10

Agenda Setting: Adapt your agenda to address the need

Process Produces Results

If "purpose" is the steering wheel of a car, "process" is the engine. While purpose sets the direction, process gets you to your destination. A process is simply a series of steps to arrive at a result. To accomplish anything, people step through a process. Whether developing a strategic plan for a multi-billion dollar corporation or ordering a hamburger from the take-out window ("Will you have fries with that?"), a series of steps are used to arrive at the result.

Part of the job of a facilitator is to create the process (the agenda) the team will use to accomplish its purpose. If the facilitator is successful, the team will be able to execute the process effectively and efficiently. They will produce the desired result, wasting no resources and with minimal strain.

Know Your Process Cold: The Facilitation Guide

While a standard agenda might include the specific activities to be covered, a detailed facilitation guide covers considerably more. The purpose of the facilitation guide is to ensure that the facilitator has thought through how each agenda item will be facilitated.

A detailed facilitation guide includes the following:

- Purpose of the session
- Products to be created (and sample formats if possible)
- Process steps to be taken (this is what most people think of as the agenda)
- Facilitation details for each process step (P-Q-R-S-T)
  - **P**rocess technique that will be used (e.g., brain-storming, listing, prioritizing, grouping – see The Secrets of Information Gathering);
  - **Q**uestion to start the process step (i.e., the type-b starting question);
  - **R**ecording method to document the responses received (e.g., simple list, two-column matrix, participants record on post-ittm pads);
  - **S**upplies required to perform the process (e.g., post-ittm, dots)
  - **T**iming and estimated duration

Consider having a facilitation guide for each of your standard agendas. The benefits of having a facilitation guide are similar to the benefits of a sample agenda, only amplified.

NOW THAT WE HAVE INTRODUCED YOU TO THE TEN PRINCIPLES OF FACILITATION, TRY THEM!

Applying this methodology will help you lead a group to consensus every time and bring the facilitative leader out of you. [Find more helpful facilitation training here](#) to take your skills to the next level.

Help us share the power of facilitation

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Leadership Strategies, Inc. is a national leader in facilitation services, having trained over 17,000 individuals in facilitation skills for twenty years. We provide professional facilitation services for areas such as strategic planning, issue resolution, team building, and other group sessions. Additionally, we offer expert training services that help individuals strengthen their soft skills through facilitation.

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