

Balancing the Roles of Leader and Facilitator



In order for any facilitated activity to be effective, the leader and the facilitator need to be crystal clear about each other's respective roles and responsibilities. There are a number of dynamics that make it a challenge to balance the role of the leader and facilitator.

- Facilitators are usually asked to work with groups at the request of the leader. As a result, leaders often assume that they are the client and that the facilitator is there to do their bidding.
- Leaders often request facilitation assistance but actually have an outcome in mind that they want the facilitator to lead the group toward.
- Leaders may indicate that they're prepared to give over process control, only to step in and try to control the flow, especially if the conversation shifts in a direction they don't personally favor.
- Leaders may indicate a readiness to empower and share control that they aren't actually prepared to accept.

Given these dynamics, facilitators will need to:

- Clarify that the client is the entire group, department, or team, including the leader, but is not exclusively the leader. This should be done in advance of any facilitator assignment.
- Ask the leader if they have a specific outcome in mind, how open they are to innovative solutions, or if there are specific solutions that need to be classified as unacceptable.
- To clarify his/her role as facilitator in advance of the meeting so that both the leader and the other participants are clear that it is the facilitator's role to design and manage all process elements while remaining neutral on content.
- To ensure that there is clarity on the part of the leader and all group members regarding the group's level of empowerment to make decisions.

Nothing causes greater distrust among participants than confusion about empowerment. It's quite common for groups to be asked to deliberate on matters that will eventually be decided elsewhere. Since confusion about empowerment is such a major source of confusions and disillusionment, facilitators always need to clarify the actual level of empowerment at which a decision is being made and ensure that this is fully understood by all group members.

Any decision can be made at one of four levels:

Level 1: A **directive decision** is a decision that's made by the leader in which group members have no say and must comply.

Level 2: A **consultative decision** is a decision in which the leader is making the decision but is first seeking the group's ideas and suggestions.

Level 3: A **participative decision** is a decision where the group is being asked to create recommendations and action plans for which they need the leader's approval before implementing.

Level 4: A **delegated decision** is a decision where the group is fully delegated to plan and act without the need to seek further approvals. If the group is acting at this level of empowerment, they will need to clarify if the decision will be made by consensus or by a vote.

The important thing to remember is not to make assumptions that everyone is clear about the extent of power that has been extended to the group. This clarification needs to be made ahead of time, communicated to all concerned, and verified at the time of the meeting.

When the leader is in the room

In an ideal world, relations between leaders and staff would be so safe, open, and honest that everyone could confidently speak their mind with the leader present. The reality is that most groups feel inhibited in the presence of the leader. Sometimes this is due to a past history of reprisals over comments made at meetings. In other cases the unease stems from a simple lack of experience with collaboration and dialogue between organizational levels. Whether this inhibition is real or just a perception, facilitators need strategies to ensure that conversations aren't hampered by the presence of leaders.

Let's review the pros and cons of having leaders present during facilitated conversations.

PROS	CONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Their presence demonstrates their openness and commitment to collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The leader's presence may keep people from raising issues or identifying problems
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leaders have wisdom and experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Their presence may inhibit discussion and creativity
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leaders see the big picture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The leader may dominate
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• They can help the group access resources and remove barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• They may hinder member ownership

Asking leaders not to attend meetings is not only impractical, but also denies the group one of its most valuable resources. The key is to talk to leaders in advance about the potential downside of their participation to increase their awareness and enroll their support.

Some strategies to consider:

- Ask the leader to start meetings where staff input is being sought by making a statement that sets a positive and open tone. He/she could ask for lively debate and a free exchange of creative ideas.
- The leader could be invited to suggest some safety norms for the meeting such as:
 - What's said in the room, stays in the room.
 - Naming issues or problems in order to solve them is constructive.
 - There will be no retaliation for any comments made in a problem-solving spirit.
- Reduce leader domination by coaching them to refrain from putting their ideas or solutions on the table too early or too often so they don't hinder input.
- Ask leaders to clearly announce when they're sharing expertise, offering information, or announcing a nonnegotiable item. Help them to see this as different from offering an idea or suggestion.
- Coach leaders to present ideas as questions instead of statements, so as to encourage conversations rather than end them.
- Encourage the leader to switch from strictly playing the content role to taking up more facilitative functions like paraphrasing the comments of others, asking clarifying questions, posing probing questions, and asking quiet people for their input.
- The meeting design could be divided into sections so that the leader can share valuable information, then leave during sensitive problem solving discussion. He or she can then return to hear recommendations for action and to offer their support.
- Finally, the leader should be encouraged to refrain from taking responsibility for action plans that are more suitable left to staff. Encourage the leader to play the role of sponsor to staff initiatives, which involves coaching, obtaining resources and removing barriers.

Above all, managing the participation of leaders shouldn't be left until the middle of the meeting when negative impacts of their presence have already had an effect on proceedings.

QuickTime™ and a decompressor are needed to see this picture.