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## Facilitation Skills Workbook

083 435 7469  
[info@tranxendconsulting.com](mailto:info@tranxendconsulting.com)  
[tranxendconsulting.com](http://tranxendconsulting.com)

# Facilitation Skills

by

**tranxend Consulting (Pty) Ltd**

***"Lots of folks confuse bad management with destiny."***

***Kin Hubbard***

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Website: [www.tranxendconsulting.com](http://www.tranxendconsulting.com)

You can contact tranxend Consulting at: [info@tranxendconsulting.com](mailto:info@tranxendconsulting.com)

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# 1 What Is Facilitation?

*"It is a misuse of our power to take responsibility  
for solving problems that belong to others."*

*Peter Block*

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## **Objective:**

***By the end of this session you will be able to:***

***Understand the three main stages of facilitation and how to approach the task systematically***

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Facilitation skills are one of the most important sets of skills for both leaders and employees. Take any organisation and you will see that meetings are a big part of everyday life. A group of people come together to exchange ideas, brainstorm, get inspired, energised and to plan the next set of actions that will get them closer towards a definite objective. Team meetings if organised and conducted correctly can be immensely powerful but they can also be a waste of team's time and energy.

To get the best from such gatherings, a "facilitator" can be highly instrumental. Such a person can guide the group and help them to follow specific group processes that are ideal for the task at hand and the participants involved.

Good facilitation is both a skill and an art. It comes with awareness of tools, following proven guidelines, deep observation, people skills and an enthusiasm to help people. This course aims to provide you with the best tools and techniques used by successful facilitators.

In this introductory session, you will examine the nature of facilitation, what it is and what it is not, who is ideal to facilitate a meeting and what can lead to poor facilitation. You will then learn about the three important stages of facilitation and what is involved in each stage.

## 1.1 The Facilitator

As a facilitator, your aim is to design, manage and assist a group event with the aim of achieving an objective. Your role as a facilitator is to make the event more effective and efficient.

Hence, when facilitating, the aim is to come up with a *group process* that flows smoothly, allowing the group to come up with ideas and solutions and ultimately make decisions.

Some regard a facilitator as someone who records the ideas expressed by others. This task is indeed important and is something a facilitator should do but there is much more to the role than that. Recording ideas and actions is only one small aspect of it.

As a facilitator you don't have to be a subject expert. You will need to be familiar with the domain in order to understand and manage discussions, but expertise of the subject is not necessarily required.

What does a facilitator do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a group process to help the group meet an objective</li> <li>• Make an environment where ideas can be exchanged and creative thinking is encouraged</li> <li>• Manage the event and help the group reach an outcome</li> </ul>
What does a facilitator not do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influence or dictate a specific view</li> <li>• Influence the outcome by biasing the discussions in a preferred direction</li> </ul>

## 1.2 Who Is an Ideal Facilitator?

Facilitation takes a considerable amount of focus and concentration. It is difficult to manage people while also contributing to ideas and problem solving.

To make sure you are a suitable person to facilitate the group, you must be neutral. To see if you are an ideal candidate, considering the following checklist:

✓	Checklist
	Are you an experienced person when it comes to the topic of the discussion?
	Do you have information about the topic that others don't have which you should share with the group before they can make any meaningful decisions?
	Are you an authority on the topic of discussion whose view is highly regarded?
	Are you an important stakeholder whose view and decisions are important?

If you have answered yes to one or more of the items in the checklist you should seriously consider using a different facilitator instead.

**PRACTICE: Facilitation Past Experiences**

Consider your past experiences of facilitation when you were attending the event and someone was facilitating it. Answer the following questions.

Recall an event which you thought was facilitated well. What did the facilitator do that made you feel this way?

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Now think of an event that did not go well and you thought it was mainly due to the poor performance of the facilitator. What did the facilitator do that led to such a poor experience?

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### 1.3 Dreadful Facilitators

A great way to learn about effective facilitation is to examine those that are poor. Here are some examples of poor facilitators:

<b>Facilitator Behaviour</b>	<b>Description</b>
The Know-it-All	This facilitator thinks he knows all the answers and constantly jumps in to share his infinite wisdom.
The Rambler	This facilitator loves the sound of his own voice and talks constantly.
The Drill Sergeant	This facilitator follows the agenda like it is the ten commandments. He is uncompromising and doesn't understand participants' different needs when it comes to timing and pace.
The Imitator	This facilitator imitates what he thinks a facilitator must do rather than actually helping and guiding participants towards a definitive objective.
The Snail	This facilitator is painfully slow. Rather than moving on to more useful and exciting topics, spends much too long on trivial matter. He also tends to explain the obvious when going through the facilitation process. Participants are bored.
The Parrot	This facilitator tends to repeat what others say all the time. There are too many recaps and summaries explaining the obvious. The pace is usually very slow and repetitive.
The Attention Seeker	This facilitator thinks that the event is about him. He constantly wants to get attention and jumps in to various discussions only to show off. It is all me, me, me.
The Sprinter	This facilitator jumps from one topic to the next, making participants go through activity after activity. There is no respite, no break and no pause. Participants' energy levels are generally ignored.
The Meek	This facilitator is unsure and un-decisive when it comes to guiding the participants. Before long, others take over and facilitate the event for him.

Some facilitators have a combination of these characteristics which makes them even worse. Just imagine an overwhelming attention-seeker-know-it-all-sprinter running an event. You don't want to be there.

## 1.4 Three Stages of Facilitation

The overall facilitation process has three main stages:

- **Designing stage.** First you will need to design the event based on what the group intends to achieve. You need to know who the participants are, how you can get them to contribute and an ideal group process that leads to achieving the objective.
- **Preparing stage.** Once you have designed the event, you need to prepare for it. This includes distributing specific information to those who will attend the meeting, book a room, arrange for any necessary resources and decide how you will run it.
- **Guiding stage.** Finally, you will run the event making sure that everyone contributes to it. Your main aim here is to ensure that people follow the correct group process and participants take shared responsibility in the outcome.

Let's examine each stage in more detail.

### 1.5 Designing Stage

In the design stage, you will need to gather information and make some important decisions about how you want to facilitate the event. Here is what you need to consider:

#### 1.5.1 Identify Outcomes

This is crucial as it allows you to know if the event has been successful. Without a clear outcome in mind, the event can easily turn into a chat about non-important topics.

If the event takes place over multiple sessions, you will need to define an overall outcome and individual outcomes for each session. Make sure you are clear on how these individual outcomes lead to the main outcome.

If you have been asked to facilitate by someone else, you need to understand exactly what is expected. Make sure you communicate your overall plan of the event with this person to make sure you are on the right track and there is no room for miscommunication.

#### 1.5.2 Collect Information

Before you can make design decisions, you need to collect the following data:

- The number of participants
- The background and position of participants
- The nature of the topics under consideration
- The roles of participants in relation to the topic
- The extent of involvement required by participants
- How well participants know the subject
- How well participants know each other
- The available time and resources
- Any specific deadlines for decision making

#### 1.5.3 Choose Structure

Decide if you want to have an *open discussion* or a *structured process*. If you want a quick, informal chat about non-critical decisions, an open discussion might be more efficient. Open discussion is also useful in early stages of exploration of a topic where you simply want to get people to exchange ideas.

If the outcome requires decision making backed up by data and discussions, a structured group process is more suitable.

### 1.5.4 Plan the Group Processes

Once you have decided to use a structured process, decide on how you want to get people to interact with each other. This is usually achieved using specific facilitation tools, brainstorming and decision making techniques. You will be introduced to a number of these techniques later in the course.

### 1.5.5 Identify Ground Rules for the Event

The purpose of the rules is to prevent trouble. The rule helps to provide a structure that everyone adheres to. Your aim is to make everyone feel comfortable to speak their mind freely without fear of personal attacks or retribution.

Design the rules based on the required outcome, the background of participants involved, your chosen group processes and your previous experience of running similar events.

Here is an example of ground rules:

Allowed	Not Allowed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Speaking your mind however outrageous or unusual it may seem</li> <li>▪ Asking questions from others to expand or seek clarification</li> <li>▪ Discussing topics while respecting the opinion of others especially when different from yours</li> <li>▪ Asking to spend more time on a given topic which you believe deserves more attention</li> <li>▪ Following the facilitator's guidance on what topics to cover, timing and general running of the event</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Personal attacks</li> <li>▪ Shouting</li> <li>▪ Interrupting and not allowing others to express their views</li> <li>▪ Blaming rather than focusing on solving problems</li> <li>▪ Intimidating others to submit to your view</li> </ul>

### 1.5.6 Plan the Agenda

When managing people, timing is everything. Agenda design should go in parallel with other design decisions such as the choice of brainstorming techniques.

While planning the agenda consider the following:

- If participants don't know each other, you need to allocate time so they get to know each other more.
- In what order should topics be covered?
- Would you have break-out groups and separate sessions in parallel? How much time should be allocated to them?
- How will break-out groups feed back to each other and the whole group?
- Will everyone participate in all sessions?
- How will you ensure that each session leads to the next session smoothly and on time?
- When would you include summary and recap sessions to make sure everyone is clear about what has been covered so far?
- How will you close the event?

- How lively is the agenda? Does the agenda help to energise participants and make them feel creative? Have you included adequate break times?

### 1.5.7 Plan Recording of Information

As part of your role of being a facilitator you will need to have a system of recording what is discussed in the meeting. Would you take notes yourself? Would you write on a whiteboard or flipchart? Would you record the event by sound or video? How would you share what is recorded with the participants either during or after the event? Would you need to delegate this task to someone else while you focus on guiding conversations?

### 1.5.8 Identify Pre-Event Requirements

During this design stage, you will need to decide what goes into this information pack which you can distribute by e-mail, shared documents, prints or any suitable means based on the content. You may need to contact subject matter experts for their inputs on this so make sure you have plenty of time to ask, collect information and prepare the pack.

The information pack should contain at least the following:

- Objective of the event
- Where and when the event takes place
- Agenda
- What is expected of the participant?
- Who else is attending? This might be a rough list just to indicate the nature of the event.
- What should the participant do before the event to prepare for it
- What should the participant bring to the event

### 1.5.9 Identify Required Resources and Supplies

Decide what else is needed for the event. Do you need tools, prototypes, machinery or anything else present in the room? Would you need to visit an external site? Would the event need to take place in a specific lab? Would you need projectors, computers, Wi-Fi, video-conferencing, lunch, snacks, pens, charts, hot drinks, etc.? Make sure you plan for backups too in case some critical equipment, such as a projector fails.

## 1.6 Preparing Stage

After you have completed the design, you will need to prepare for the event. Consider the following:

- **Book the room.** Arrange and book the event room. Make sure there is enough space and good lighting.
- **Get supplies.** Arrange for supplies required for the event. Make arrangements based on the group process you are planning to use. Make sure you have all the necessary materials such as post-it notes, cards, paper, colour pens, flipcharts, etc.
- **Set room layout.** Arrange the room so that it is suitable for your intended group process.
- **Plan contingency.** Consider what-if scenarios to prepare for all eventualities.
- **Let the participants know about the event.** Prepare and distribute a pre-event information pack to all participants.

## 1.7 Guiding Stage

Now that you have prepared for the event, it is time to run through your facilitation design. Consider the following:

- **Establish your authority as a facilitator.** Establish yourself as the person who leads and has the final say on how the event is run. This will make it easier to handle potential conflicts or issues should they occur.
- **Explain the ground rules.** Explain that there are a number of ground rules. You can either explain them directly, distribute a printout of them or write them on a flipchart. Don't write them on a whiteboard because you will then have to erase the board to start the event. Engage the participants to comment on the ground rules. A great way to get their commitment is to ask them to suggest the ground rules themselves.
- **Share the overall agenda.** Set the scene for what the group needs to achieve. Ensure all participants know what is expected of each of them.
- **Make people feel comfortable with each other.** Use icebreakers to make participants feel comfortable with each other especially if they don't know each other.
- **Make the group feel excited about going through the event.** Positive energy can go a long way. No one wants to spend time on something they don't care about. Get participants to express and acknowledge that they want to go through the event and that it will be fun, educational and useful.
- **As you go through the event, you will need to maintain this energy.** Happy and excited people tend to be more creative as there is less chance of getting distracted or daydreaming. We will explore a number of techniques on how this is achieved later on in the course.
- **Encourage contribution.** Make sure everyone is involved.
- **Control participation.** Make sure no one dominates other participants. Intervene and resolve conflicts as necessary. You will be introduced to a number of techniques later on in the course.
- **Use checkpoints and summary points to keep everyone updated.** Make sure everyone is on-board and not left behind. Some people might be more familiar with a given area or topic of discussion and may naturally want to move to other areas. If you have people who are unfamiliar, you will need to slow down and make sure everyone is clear about what is discussed.
- **Record what is discussed and agreed on.** As a facilitator, you often do this yourself or if the event is formal and you may not have enough time to manage discussions and record them you can delegate it to a transcriber. Make sure that you record key points raised, problems, suggested solutions, decisions and actions.

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## Contact Us

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