



When Leaders Should Step Aside and Use an Outside Facilitator

By Christine W. Zust, M.A.

As a leader, you often feel that you are responsible for initiating planning discussions. You may also feel compelled to lead all of those discussions. There are times when you are more effective when you sit at the table with your executive team and participate in the discussion rather than try to lead as facilitator. In that case, you need a professional facilitator to help guide the process. As you work with an outside facilitator, you will gain a great deal from that working relationship:

Objectivity. The facilitator is an objective third party who brings the value of impartiality to the discussion. S/he brings no baggage, prior history, hidden agenda, or subjective thinking that can often “lead” the discussion in the wrong direction. You want the participants to feel free and open to discuss their thoughts and opinions. Often, if a leader leads the discussion, participants can feel intimidated because they are expected to “agree with the boss.” The result: a planning session can be led in the wrong direction without the leader as facilitator even knowing it. I received a telephone call from the vice president of marketing for a manufacturing company a few years ago. He had attended a senior management meeting the day before with the CEO leading the discussion about succession planning. It was disastrous because the CEO was driving the discussion his way, and he could not “see” how ineffective his facilitation skills were.

Process. A skilled facilitator helps to guide you and your group through a process that addresses a specific topic or issue. A facilitator knows what questions to ask, when to ask them, how to ask them, and most importantly, how to involve everyone in the room. Get a room full of people, and you will get someone who dominates the discussion, someone who plays devil’s advocate, and someone who says nothing. A gifted facilitator knows when to use individual work, partner work, small group work and large group work to bring out the best in all participants. The facilitator will also know how to direct the conversation so everyone in the room participates. The facilitator, with laser sharp focus, recognizes the different personal, thinking and learning styles in the room.

Observation. Let’s look at observation both from your perspective and from the facilitator’s. First, your perspective: If you were to lead a discussion, you would miss the nuances and the group dynamics. By becoming part of the group, you have the unique opportunity to observe the dynamics of your team at work. People’s strengths and weaknesses, their thinking and learning styles are revealed to you. You participate and watch the team in action at the same time. The facilitator’s perspective: The facilitator watches the group in action, and silently observes participants’ verbal and nonverbal language, tone of voice, and content of their comments to understand what issues are sensitive, what topics need more time for discussion, or when to avert potential conflict.

Synthesis. The facilitator takes the information that has been shared, and reflects it back to the group in a collective fashion. It is part art, part science, with a great deal of intuition to bring it all together. A gifted facilitator can assemble the key messages that have surfaced through the entire discussion. Everything is laid out before the group for their reflection and response.

Timely. Using an outside facilitator saves time because s/he is familiar with the process. If a discussion is led by you or a designated inside staff person, the communication process, idea-sharing and brainstorming process can get sidetracked and off topic. The facilitator keeps the group on track, and maximizes the amount of time that you have to discuss the topic. Instead of attending multiple nonproductive meetings, participants come away from a professionally facilitated meeting knowing that their voices were heard and that more was accomplished, often in less time.

When should you use a facilitator? Facilitators can be used for any group meetings, such as board or staff retreats, strategic planning sessions, open forums or think tanks for new product development, and target-specific focus groups...any opportunity where you want people to come together to openly discuss issues and generate ideas for future action.

How do you find a skilled facilitator? Professional referrals are the best. Talk to clients who have used professional facilitators in the past. Ask for at least three references from people who have used their services. Professional facilitation organizations, such as the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) provide a worldwide roster of their members. Visit the IAF website at www.iaf-world.org.

Once you have worked with professional facilitators and seen the results, you will forever keep them included in your roster of strategic business resources.

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