



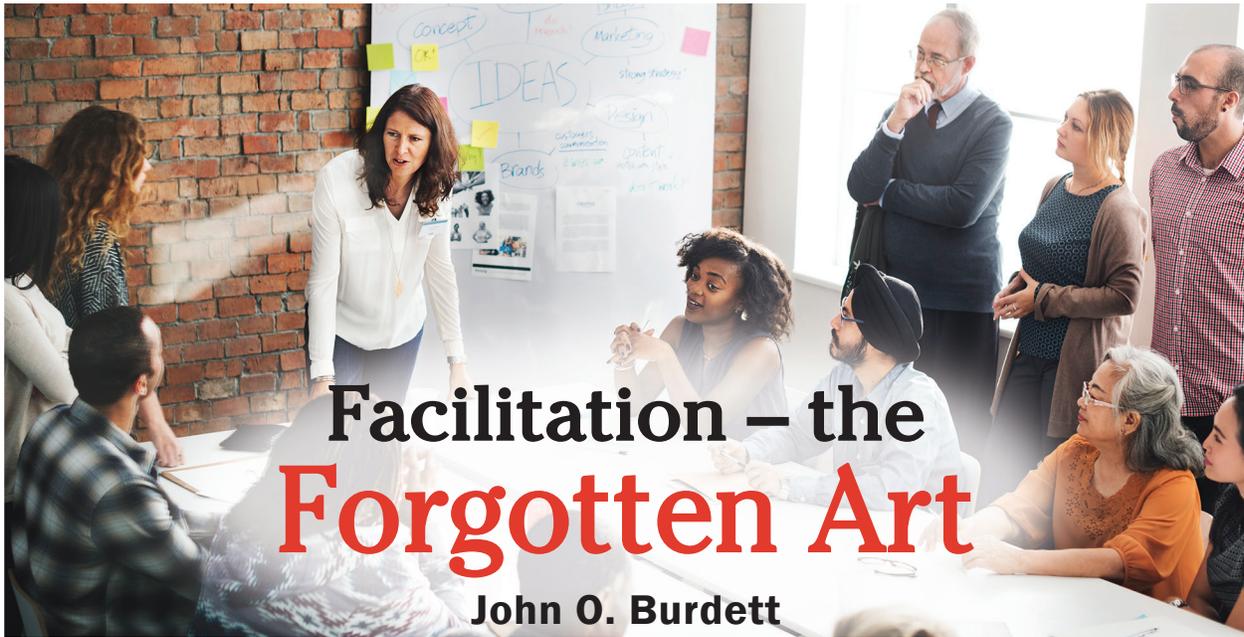
# Facilitation – the Forgotten Art

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## Why Facilitation?

In response to a disappointing engagement survey a group of influential middle managers meet to develop a pragmatic action plan. Softness in the marketplace prompts the business's senior sales executives to come together. The organization's top HR executives organize an all-day session to explore organization design options. Purchasing managers from two recently merged businesses share their experience around blockchain. A project team has gotten off track. A process redesign team, made up of front-line assembly workers, is struggling. A leadership development session seeks to unbundle the learning derived from the experiential learning element the group have just been through.

What do all the above have in common? Three things stand out. One: these meetings either propel the business forward or become a source of ongoing frustration. Two: the examples given are but a representative sample of getting things done in today's "team of teams" organization. Three: how the meeting is facilitated is no small thing.

The practice not too long ago would have been to hire an external facilitator. Indeed, some large organizations have traditionally employed a team of trained, internal facilitators. The





problem being, whereas in the recent past, such meetings were an event ... today they are commonplace. Cost, availability, bringing an external facilitator up to speed, the fact that the kind of meetings referred to have been folded into the very fabric of the organization and, what can be referred to as, “learning leakage” make “self-facilitation” overwhelmingly the option of choice.

Okay, but not so quick. Facilitation amounts to rather more than someone standing at the front of the room waving a felt-tip pen around. Electronic white boards, audience response technology and video conferencing might make things quicker, they might even make the session appear slicker, but they don’t really add much to issues such as trust, openness, collaboration and/or commitment to the outcome. The “felt-tip pen” is a relevant metaphor. In the hands of a seasoned facilitator, it becomes the orchestra leader’s baton. When wielded by a facilitator who is less professional it comes across as symbolic “finger wagging.” “I am in charge.” “Let’s do it my way.”

Facilitation is like skiing. Preparation, practice and picking the right line are essential. It’s also a mistake to assume that facilitation is facilitation is facilitation. In other words, know your audience, know the outcome desired and introduce a facilitation approach (style) that best fits the situation.

## What Is Facilitation?

To “facilitate” is to make something easier than it might otherwise be. The role of the “facilitator” is to help a group/team draw insight from an activity, group discussion and/or workshop. Insight that, were the group left to their own devices, would be (far) more difficult to achieve.

The facilitator introduces the topic, sets the context, asks challenging questions, enables participants to share their experience, deals with disruption, manages the mavericks, summarises common points of understanding and generally keeps the session on track. When facilitation is at its best you see a natural ease and elegance, like a swan on a quiet waterway. That grace belies what is going on below the surface. What remains hidden is the level of preparation, degree of concentration and intellectual agility demanded.

An outstanding facilitator is an engaging, subtle, active, collaborative, supportive, unbiased partner in the learning process. Facilitation is never and can never be about the facilitator. If the facilitator moves outside of the 80-20% rule,<sup>1</sup> participants are ill-served. If the collective experience in the group remains “undiscovered,” potential value is destroyed. Ego, a need to be heard and hubris are the enemy of good facilitation. Facilitators who feel the need to pontificate or lecture – even for part of the time – are in the wrong line of work.

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1 At least 80% of the focus lies with participants.



Without psychological safety, unless people feel free to challenge the status quo, where speaking to truth is constrained ... much that would otherwise be possible remains unfulfilled. Candour is enabled when everyone recognises that their presence is accepted, participants know they can share how they feel about the issue without risk and confidentiality, as appropriate, is assured. A true sense of “working together” is apparent when attendees shut off their phones (and put them away), participants don’t speak over each other and respect frames even the most robust interaction. To use a hockey expression, although members of a great team might occasionally revert to the “use of their elbows in the corners,” respect is ever-present.

The emotional architecture of facilitation is that group learning is far more important than the facilitator’s needs. A value-adding facilitator comes to the session having set aside personal opinions, biases and assumptions. Additionally, listening, humour, positive reinforcement, asking great questions and the sensitivity needed to encourage participants to share both their concerns and their experience is the mark of excellence.

Mastery in facilitation is found in (1) an extraordinary level of rapport; (2) the use of metaphor to challenge the status quo; (3) the ability to respectfully push back against defensive routines; (4) locating the thread of connection between the various views brought forth; (5) adding to the learning participant’s take away by flexing the insights gained against a robust conceptual model; (6) knowing when to smile; and (7) courtesy. The late Peter Drucker was quick to remind people that “courtesy is the lubricant of leadership.”

Excellence in facilitation shares much with what it means to be an outstanding coach.

- ✓ Humility
- ✓ Conduct with a hidden baton but don’t start to play any of the instruments
- ✓ Come with a beginner’s mind ... be open to being surprised
- ✓ Pass power to the participants
- ✓ Ask great questions
- ✓ Push for clarity around what the real issue is but avoid suggesting potential solutions
- ✓ Listen, listen, listen
- ✓ Summarise what has been agreed to
- ✓ Push for objective action regarding next steps



## Context Is Everything

Mastery doesn't occur in a vacuum. Fail to prepare ... and be prepared to fail.<sup>2</sup> Being ready embraces several essential questions. What are the participants' expectations? What is the background and experience of the participants? Perhaps most important of all, what is the wider business context? And the key to the latter? What is the organization's story? That story is shaped by five questions:

1. What is the organization's compelling purpose?
2. Where is the business heading?
3. What do those who steer and run the business believe in (values)?
4. What makes the organization special?
5. How does the organization and its employees make a difference in people's lives?

It's not enough to build a strong ladder. Success depends on ensuring that it's leaning against the right wall. For wall read "context." Great questions will emerge in the moment, but the roots of those questions lie in doing the hard work ahead of time. A great question meets the following criteria. It challenges the listener's assumptions. It asks for what you want ... and not what you don't want (optimistic pursuit of outcomes, not being buried by the barriers). Using a Japanese proverb, "It makes the silence louder."

## Facilitation in 4

Although the text captures the essence of exemplary facilitation, special situations benefit from a facilitation "style" adapted to the opportunity at hand. Outlined are four facilitation styles. See **Figure one**. The style adopted is a function of the group, the situation at hand and the steepness of the learning curve.

**Figure one** describes the underlying theme of each of the four facilitation styles. It goes without saying, regardless of the style adopted, a successful facilitator must establish – either overtly or covertly<sup>3</sup> – (1) Why are we here? (2) What are we seeking to achieve? (3) What specific actions would make the greatest difference? (4) Are those involved committed to the agreed way forward? And (5) Did we work as a team and how can we build on that learning? Ignore these questions and what you get amounts to little more than a bridge to nowhere. Think of the five questions outlined as basic facilitation software and the four "styles" as apps that address specific situations.

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2 Reputedly a quote by Benjamin Franklin.

3 "Covertly" means steering the ship without the facilitator necessarily sharing the map he/she is following.



**1. Problem-solving facilitation (action plan)**

- **How:** classic facilitation. What is the problem/opportunity? What is the background to the problem/opportunity? What outcome is demanded? How do we get there? Have others used a meaningful template that would allow us to better get to where we need to be?<sup>4</sup>
- **Who benefits:** a group of managers/executives who know each other and who share a common purpose.
- **Challenge:** to recognise the difference between a group of people simply working toward an agreed outcome and true collaboration. The first assumes everyone will, in some way, personally benefit from the outcomes. “Seems like a good idea but what’s in it for me?” Collaboration, by comparison, has an altruistic core: “the success of the team is more important than my needs.”
- **Concerns:** (1) lack of psychological safety means that the real issues can remain hidden; and (2) it is easy for less assertive participants to stay on the periphery.

<p><b>1. Problem-solving</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Classic facilitation: What is the problem or challenge? Where do we go from here?</li> <li>• Working together vs. collaboration.</li> <li>• Psychological safety.</li> <li>• Context, balance task and process outcomes, understand different roles.</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>ACTION PLAN</b></p>	<p><b>4. Warrior Facilitation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New language.</li> <li>• Pose great questions.</li> <li>• Introduces best practice.</li> <li>• Especially useful when looking at culture change at the top of the house</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS</b></p>
<p><b>2. Collaborative Facilitation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Especially useful for millennials, participants who lack trust and/or fear manipulation.</li> <li>• Needs light touch.</li> <li>• Demands patience.</li> <li>• Leave PowerPoint at home.</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>FIRST, AGREE TO THE PROCESS</b></p>	<p><b>3. Inductive Facilitation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Especially useful to accompany experiential learning.</li> <li>• Draws on underpinning conceptual model, rich metaphor and/or robust template.</li> <li>• Learning as play vs. play as learning.</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>LEARNING HOW TO LEARN</b></p>

**FACILITATION IN 4**

**Figure one**

<sup>4</sup> A session on strategy is a typical example.



- **Common mistakes:** (1) losing sight of the business context (e.g., organization values); and (2) a focus dominated by the outcomes (task criteria) to be delivered – with little thought as to the interaction between participants (process criteria).<sup>5</sup>
- **Tip:** recognise that there are six quite distinct team roles: (1) Visionary – creates tomorrow in the room today; (2) Explorer – pushes for and/or brings the business case to the table; (3) Pioneer – a source of new ideas; (4) Warrior(s) – delivery is everything; (5) Navigator – influences team process/interaction; and (6) Maverick – challenges the status quo. Where one of these essential team attributes is missing, mastery in facilitation means to introduce questions that bring that role to the table.

## 2. Collaborative facilitation (first, agree to the process)

- **How:** participants spend time up front agreeing on the what and the how of facilitation.
- **Who benefits:** millennials, a group of middle managers who feel disenfranchised and/or any group that might be concerned that the approach to facilitation could be manipulative.
- **Challenge:** to win trust the facilitator needs a light touch.
- **Concern:** the facilitator may, at times, have to be more intrusive than is implied by a collaborative approach.
- **Common mistake:** not setting aside enough time.
- **Tip:** leave PowerPoint at home.

## 3. Inductive facilitation (learning how to learn)

- **How:** explore, build on and/or inductively uncover a meaningful conceptual model. Anchor the session to a great question. The following being good examples. “What does it mean to be part of a great team?” How and in what way did the best leader you have ever worked for inspire you?” “How do you build trust?” “What is organization culture?”
- **Who benefits:** (1) a group of participants where reframing mindset and/or where the potential for learning how to learn comes to the fore; and/or (2) an approach that is invaluable in support of an experiential activity.
- **Challenge:** the facilitator needs to have deep knowledge of the conceptual model and underpinning learning needed that prompted the session.

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5 Four to six agreed “rules” about how people need to work together if the group/team is adjudged to be successful; process criteria that are reviewed regularly against the actual behaviour.



- **Concerns:** (1) the facilitator playing too directive a role; and (2) not moving to “What to do differently on Monday” quickly enough.
- **Common mistake:** introducing an engaging experiential activity and then naïvely asking participants immediately afterwards (1) “What happened?” (2) “What did you learn from the experience?” and (3) “How does that relate to your workplace?” Without a conceptual model, a rich metaphor and/or template to unpack the learning there is little traction for anything other than surface awareness.
- **Tip:** (1) The model must resonate with the group in question; and (2) ensure that the experiential activity is framed as *learning as play*<sup>6</sup> (an activity that directly models the behaviour demanded) vs. *play as learning* (a fun activity, a generic game or an activity that has little direct relationship to the issue on hand).

#### 4. Warrior facilitation (challenge assumptions)

- **How:** question the prevailing mindset, introduce new language, ask great questions and bring insight and knowledge of best practice to the session. Be prepared “to introduce the stick that stirs the drink.” Especially useful when looking at culture change. Essential, in many ways, because those who shaped the culture invariably see “their creation” through rose coloured glasses.
- **Who benefits:** top executives who get used to people telling them what they think the leader(s) in question want to hear.
- **Challenges:** (1) to question attendee’s assumptions, while always remaining respectful; (2) the credibility of the facilitator; and (3) the recognition that timing is everything.
- **Concern:** could be a career-limiting move for the inexperienced facilitator.
- **Common mistake:** not asking permission to “push against the grain.”
- **Tip:** with top teams use C-suite language.

## Conclusion

Although it has been part of the conversation for at least three decades, as we move into fast, flexible and focused organization forms the team really does become the basic building block of commercial success. And here we are discussing a potpourri of groups, teams and community activities. Great teams don’t just happen and collaboration as a way of being isn’t a natural extension of the “latest” organization chart. Human nature is, well, human.

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<sup>6</sup> This implies designing the activity to specifically fit the need and resisting a well-used “entertainment option.”



Meanwhile, ensure that whoever does step into the facilitation breach knows what they are about. Facilitation isn't an afterthought, the task you give to the team member who has the least to say and/or something akin to a rugby scrum. Throw the ball in and see what happens. Becoming an outstanding facilitator is a dramatically underestimated skill. Don't think otherwise.

A mistake that even professional facilitators often make is to assume that one approach to facilitation meets the needs of all situations. One size doesn't fit all. That said, a masterful facilitator sees the four approaches outlined in **Figure one** not necessarily as distinct approaches but as a rich pallet of behaviours to be mixed, matched and blended as the situation demands.

Few companies teach facilitation as part of their leadership development agenda. And yet, if we want collaboration, if we want to grow teams, if we want to challenge talent in a meaningful way ... being able to get the best out of meeting of minds becomes pretty important. Good luck on your next opportunity to facilitate. It is one of the most difficult but at the same time rewarding leadership skills. Remember, from a career perspective, bringing the best out of a group session is something of a forgotten art. Learn how to facilitate and it will serve you well. Be assured, it will be quite a while before your digital assistant facilitates your next offsite meeting.





John has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. In particular, he has worked on organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations.

He holds a doctorate in management development and has, since 2000, published ten best-selling books on leadership, talent management and organization culture. Three recent books form the talent trilogy: *Talent* (2014), *TEAM* (2015), and *The Empty Suit* (2016). *The A-Z of Organization Culture* came out in 2017. *The Evidence-based Interview* will be available in the near future.

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A range of John's books and "one-chapter" offerings can be found on all of the major online bookstore sites. Access using the author's name – John O. Burdett.



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