

Staying Neutral

It's Tough And Essential!

written by Myriam Laberge, June 2010

Can you be effective as a facilitator if you are not neutral? I.e., if you have expertise in the content and/or have a stake in the outcomes generated by the group, can you still facilitate effectively? Your job as Facilitator is to focus on group and meeting process. As tempting as it may be, great facilitation requires that you avoid controlling or influencing the discussion and content.

Which Role Are You Playing?

Pure Facilitator: You are a group process expert who does not contribute to meeting content and have no responsibility for implementation (content and outcome neutral). You are there to assist the group in conducting its work (process). A pure, neutral, external (to the group) facilitator is essential with high stakes, sensitive issues and when everyone in the group must actively contribute their content as a full participant.

Facilitator/Expert: You give advice from your subject matter expertise (content); but have no stake in the group's work (process neutral) and decisions (outcome neutral). You use your expertise to help the group discuss and come to its own decisions about the topic by: asking questions; offering suggestions, advice and options for consideration. You do not impose your opinions nor make decisions on behalf of the group.

Appointed Chair/Group Leader As Facilitator: You want to contribute to discussions (content), control the group discussions and how they arrive at their decisions (process), and you have a stake in the decisions themselves (outcome). In this tough role, the group will likely neither see you as neutral, nor potentially credible on process. You can still be an effective facilitator in this role if for that meeting: 1) you do not have to contribute to content as a group member, and 2) you do not have responsibility to directly implement the decisions made. Use your knowledge to ask good open-ended questions that will help the group find its way to their own answers, without 'leading' them to a set answer. If for any reason you feel compelled to contribute to content, then your facilitation effectiveness is compromised. Transparently step out of your neutral facilitation role and hand it to another group member as you revert back to the role of group leader or member.

Pure Presenter: You are a content/subject matter expert (process and outcome neutral). Your goal is to share your expertise and skill by presenting information or content. You have no responsibility for how the group functions or its work.

Instructional Facilitator: You deliver learning content in a facilitative manner (outcome neutral). You care about how the group learns and provide expertise on content, but have no stake in what the learners do with your content.