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The art of network facilitation

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The art of network facilitation

Nothing is more constant in education than change. For some it is painful, for others it is energising and fun. Some people actively seek out change and thrive on it, others come along reluctantly and with resistance. The change journey can be creative, complex and comical, as well as challenging, consuming and confusing. Change does not happen without support and challenge. When groups are immersed in their work, sometimes they can't see the wood for the trees. Seeking outside assistance from helpful companions usually clarifies direction, accelerates the process, enhances the journey and increases the sense of collective accomplishment and enjoyment. A good change journey that is productive and exhilarating usually involves effective facilitation.

This think piece draws upon research and writing on the facilitation of change in schools and networks over the last three decades. It explores the science of facilitation – the skills, tools, behaviours and strategies involved. It also addresses the particular complexities of the networked context in which this science can be applied. In short, it describes the processes by which the science of facilitation becomes the art of network facilitation. □

The art of network facilitation

In this think piece, facilitation is defined and the differences between training and facilitating are articulated. The characteristics, skills and strategies of effective facilitation are presented and different facilitation styles and frameworks for facilitation are described. The differences between internal and external facilitation, and between general and content-specific facilitation are discussed. Finally, there is a consideration of some of the common challenges faced by network facilitators.

Facilitation or training?

Facilitators help groups work together to reach a set of objectives or goals. A facilitator is a process guide who focuses discussions and clarifies understandings while encouraging sharing and problem-solving. In addition, a facilitator addresses tensions and conflicts as well as connecting people, ideas and resources. A facilitator assists the group in creating and achieving goals and expectations, provides structure and flow to meetings and activities, and acts as a group coach.

On the other hand, trainers organise learning sessions for groups of people, often in the form of workshops or other skills-based learning contexts. Generally the trainer determines the objectives, agenda and activities. The trainer usually has expertise on a specific topic or in a particular field and thus leads the learning by presenting or leading the group in a set of activities. A trainer is interested in transferring knowledge and understanding to people, or developing skills.

While the roles share many similarities and the line between facilitating and training is not definitive, the approach and stance of the two roles are quite different. Facilitators guide, coach, suggest, summarise, negotiate, empower and follow the group. Trainers direct, manage, tell, organise, control, decide and lead the group.

When you experience training, the outcome or product is determined upfront by the trainer. When you experience facilitation, however, the outcome or product is determined by the group as the process unfolds. Facilitators trust the group's ability to find its own direction and resolution, while trainers rely on their own experience and expertise in leading the group in a particular direction.

Facilitation for change

In education, the importance of enlisting the support of a 'change facilitator' has been documented since the mid-sixties and the role has continued to be promoted and studied for the past 40 years. Most school and educational reform programmes utilise such facilitators as a way of supporting the initiation, implementation and institutionalisation of change. Face-to-face interaction (and more recently online coaching) has been key to providing pressure and support during continuous improvement.

Many labels have been used to describe people in positions who facilitate change: linkers, assisters, field agents, change specialists, change agents, consulting teachers, instructional coaches, critical friends and lead teachers. Change facilitators have been involved with schools and reform for at least four decades.

Initially, facilitators were associated with large-scale externally funded projects. More recently, the role of an instructional or change coach is being implemented broadly as a key role (and strategy) in local authorities in several countries in a variety of different areas (Knight, 2005; NCSL, 2005; Neufelt & Roper, 2003; NSDC, 2005; Richardson, 2004). In the last decade, there has been a huge shift from external to internal facilitation for change. □

Effective facilitation: characteristics, skills and strategies

Pause for thought...?

Effective facilitators have many common characteristics. They are non-authoritarian, patient, persistent, adaptable, flexible, intuitive, organised, confident, non-threatening, versatile, accommodating, respectful and open-minded. In addition, they have good communication skills, tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty and an eagerness to learn. Effective facilitators also have a particular set of skills.

Miles et al (1988) identified a comprehensive set of 18 key skills for educational change facilitators – 6 general and 12 specific. This skill set was determined from a study of facilitators who were working in New York City over 20 years ago.

Skills for effective change facilitators

General skills

- interpersonal ease
- group functioning
- training and doing workshops
- master teacher
- educational content
- administrative and organisational ability

Specific skills

- **personal** – initiative taking
- **socio-emotional process** – rapport-building, support, conflict mediation, collaboration, confrontation
- **task** – individual diagnosis, organisational diagnosis, managing and controlling
- **educational content** – resource bringing and demonstration

Other skills identified in studies include: asking questions and listening, proposing, modelling, observing, coaching, brokering, conceptualising, synthesising, problem-solving, designing and linking – practitioners with other practitioners, and with research and good ideas (Hall & Hord, 1984; Knight, 2005; NSDC, 2005).

Change facilitators typically provide three forms of assistance: information assistance, general technical assistance and problem-solving or programme implementation assistance. In synthesising five studies on

change facilitators, Hood (1982) categorised the roles of change facilitators into six highly generic clusters:

- 1 general communication, liaison and co-ordination
- 2 resources finding
- 3 knowledge use facilitation
- 4 specific curriculum or expertise training
- 5 problem-solving and programme implementation assistance
- 6 miscellaneous – administrative, financial, maintenance, housekeeping and self-development

Facilitators employ a variety of strategies when working with groups and networks to guide groups in examining issues, generating alternatives, making decisions, selecting appropriate actions and activities, engaging in enquiry and tracking results. Facilitators provide opportunities for individual input and reflection, for small group discussion and interaction and for large group problem-solving and decision-making. They record issues, suggestions and decisions to preserve the 'group memory' over time.

Facilitators also use strategies to engage groups in both divergent and creative thinking and convergent decision-making and prioritising. They summarise and synthesise group work at stages to facilitate movement forward.

Effective facilitation behaviours

- asking rather than telling
- listening and observing
- structuring and guiding
- demonstrating and showing
- suggesting and proposing
- summarising and synthesising
- bringing energy and enthusiasm
- encouraging consensus and striving for win-win agreements
- balancing task orientation with relationship management
- keeping the big picture in mind while working on the details

Books are filled with strategies for facilitators to use. For example, see Bens (2005), Bridges (2003), Eller (2004), Hogan (2003), and Justice et al (1999) for descriptions of facilitation strategies and techniques. □

How can network activity be facilitated with a clear focus and a productive working environment which enables your network to move forward in a common direction?

Facilitation styles

Pause for thought...?

Effective facilitators have a range of styles. Style is described by Miles et al (1988) as ‘those skills which are largely natural, even perhaps out of the awareness or control of the change facilitator but rather a function of the facilitator’s personality.’ In an early study on facilitation style, Hall et al (1984) identified change styles of principals involved in school improvement programmes and found three kinds of behaviours. Some principals were identified as responders – they let it happen and placed heavy emphasis on allowing teachers to take the lead. Some principals were identified as managers – they helped it happen and worked without fanfare to provide basic support to facilitate change. The most effective principals were identified as initiators – they were proactive in making things happen. Initiators were clear, decisive and held strong beliefs about good schools and teaching and worked intensively to attain this vision.

Of the six facilitation styles identified by Kilcher (1991), four were found to be effective and two ineffective. When facilitators were either passive or confrontational they were not helpful to groups, nor were they effective in the facilitator role. Effective facilitators tended to move along a continuum of styles from indirective, facilitative, assertive and directive. All styles proved to be useful and appropriate in different situations. The key component appeared to be the fit of the facilitator style with the groups in different contexts. These facilitator styles are similar to the leadership styles described by Goleman et al (2002) in their study of managers’ emotional intelligence and their impact on organisational climate and productivity. They found six leadership styles. Two – coercive and pace-setting – were ineffective and affected workplace climate and productivity negatively. Effective leaders used a combination of the other four styles – authoritative, coaching, affiliative, democratic. All of these styles had a positive impact on both the workplace climate and productivity.

Internal and external facilitators

In school learning networks both external and internal facilitators are important in the change process. External facilitators are needed to link local sites – schools and local authorities – with resources and ideas. They serve as translators and assist practitioners with putting research into practice. They provide bridges and channels to connect teachers, schools and districts with one another. They transport knowledge, ideas and strategies from one place to another. They provide an outside perspective and shed light on misunderstandings and differences. External facilitators bring objectivity and fresh energy to groups and networks.

Internal or local facilitators are critical to providing the continuous personal interaction necessary if change is to occur. They provide the daily support and encouragement for changing practices. They assist by observing and coaching, demonstrating and discussing, suggesting and problem-solving. Internal facilitators know the characters, the culture and the context. They know the strengths and weaknesses of the people, the programmes and the organisation. They are deeply immersed in the issues and challenges on the front line. Internal facilitators nurture people and keep change efforts focused, in conversations and on the agenda.

In learning networks a combination of internal and external facilitation can be very powerful. While external facilitators provide the long view and often operate from a distance, internal facilitators work up close and provide the ongoing support. Working as a team, they provide the challenge and support to ignite enthusiasm and generate energy for changing practices, programmes and policies for learning.

Generalist and specialist facilitators

In school networks both generalists and content or expert specialist facilitators have proven to be useful. Different types of assistance – general facilitation and specific training or coaching – have different impacts.

Generalists have proved important in getting things started properly, mobilising and sustaining interest, establishing commitment, finding and identifying programmes and resources, suggesting strategies, and helping to identify and arrange intensive and extensive expert assistance and training.

Expert specialists provide more specific forms of support and training. They bring subject area or content expertise and support implementation of new programmes and practices in classrooms. They assist with planning and organising instruction, finding and bringing resources, demonstrating and presenting, coaching and giving regular feedback, co-ordinating team meetings, analysing and disaggregating student achievement data, and looking at student work. In school networks, content specialists are proving to both broaden and deepen changes in learning-centred leadership practices. □

There are a variety of different ways in which groups and networks might be facilitated – which combination of approaches do you think is best suited to the needs of your network right now?

Pause for thought...?

Frameworks for facilitation

Effective network facilitators use frameworks to guide their work. They provide conceptual maps for groups to help frame the group process. They work from group issues and summarise the collective discussion by giving the group 'scaffolds' or 'anchors' to guide discussions and decisions. They offer intellectual propositions to create dissonance as well as clarity and coherence. For example, if a school network has focused on thinking skills, the facilitator introduces Bloom's taxonomy and de Bono's Six Hats of Thinking typology, both to organise and stretch the group.

Facilitators listen when a group is discussing a topic and provide a conceptual framework or graphic organiser to pull the ideas together with the purpose of facilitating forward movement. Listening deeply to conversations and drawing on the wealth of both research and practitioner tacit knowledge, they help a group to co-create their new understandings and knowledge. Effective facilitators have both depth and breadth of knowledge of subject matter. In the case of schools, they know curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment, and they employ many avenues to contribute to group interaction and direction.

The challenges of network facilitation

Facilitating networks is exciting and satisfying work but it can also be challenging and frustrating. Finding time to do the work is an ongoing challenge. Supporting people in transitions and change is time-consuming and emotional (Bridges, 2003). Managing time and energy requires both skill and practice, and facilitator expertise is an issue. Miles et al (1988) found that facilitators with average skills and abilities did not stay in the role. Developing skilled network facilitators or coaches is therefore, important, although it is equally important to recognise that developing this expertise takes time (Bransford et al, 2000).

'Fit' is another important consideration. Matching facilitators with specific groups within a network is tricky. Some facilitators work well across contexts; others can be successful in specific situations. Objectivity and confidentiality are critical to successful network facilitation – maintaining distance while establishing relationships requires careful negotiating. Building the capacity of the network is the ultimate goal of a good facilitator. Navigating the stages of network development and transitioning out of the network is also a challenge which needs to be met with a skilful blend of preparation, application, intuition and interpersonal skill. □

How can your network maximise learning opportunities by developing facilitation frameworks to guide discussions and decision-making and meet the challenges of network facilitation identified?

End piece

Facilitating networks effectively is an art. Effective facilitators know the science of group processes – the tools, strategies, and techniques involved. They also have clearly-honed skills of timing, focusing, synthesising and balancing. Effective facilitation involves guiding and coaching groups in creative ways while building relationships and group cohesiveness along the way. Putting it all together to address the needs of a particular network however, requires the vision of an artist. Seeing possibilities and pictures of where a network can go, assisting them in getting there and coaching them as they create their own masterpiece along the way, is the art of network facilitation. Effective network facilitation is a combination of leading and following, of guiding and observing, of listening and suggesting, proposing and negotiating, of attending to individual, group and network dynamics, of being 'on the dance floor and up on the balcony' all at the same time. □

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