

Role of the Facilitator: A Personal Perspective

By Jami McCormack

“The Master doesn’t talk, he acts. When his work is done, the people say, ‘Amazing, we did it all by ourselves.’” – Lao Tzu, from the Tao Te Ching

I have had the pleasure of facilitating peer learning teams for two years now. I enjoy it immensely and find it very different from my day-to-day role as an assessor. As a facilitator, I play the roles of a guide, timekeeper, cheerleader, and summarizer. Observing the interaction of the peer learning group as they move toward a common goal is very rewarding because I get to witness the collaboration process in action. It’s exciting to be a part of that process. And, the meetings are a success! How do I know this? I know because I see the participants walk out of the room energized and equipped with an agreed upon protocol for productive future meetings, action steps for independent work, and a system for moving forward.

Of course, a facilitator does not work in a vacuum. The peer learning team is also held accountable in making the group successful and productive. Ideally, the team takes responsibility to do their own work—to construct their own knowledge and take what they’ve learned back to their own teams. They interact and collaborate with each other while thinking about and analyzing their work. Active engagement is key while participants strive to understand their colleagues, reflect on past successes and failures, and apply new information in innovative ways.

The facilitator’s job then, in the simplest of terms, is to support and guide the team’s work to achieve the outcomes they desire. To that end, I’ve found these basic tips help the team achieve their goals:

- Communicate the team’s purpose for each meeting.
- Reinforce agreed upon ground rules as a method for encouraging an atmosphere of mutual respect and collegiality.
- Prompt rich discussion by asking provocative questions and clarifying key points. Some key phrases to use include:
 - What I hear you saying is...
 - I’m curious about your interpretation of... Could you say more?
 - Could you tell me more about...?
 - What do you think you will do about this situation?
 - Can you offer an example of that?
 - It seems as if...

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- Listen and pose questions to broaden the discussion's scope.
- Encourage participation from team members who are perhaps more introverted or are less likely to share.
- Guide the team's focus to ensure efficient use of time and to adhere to the agreed upon timetable.
- At the end of the meeting, summarize key points and future action steps.

The facilitator is not expected to be the expert. In fact, it works quite well when members of the learning team take turns being the facilitator. The important thing is to assure that at the start of each meeting someone is clearly identified as the facilitator. So, the facilitator's role is one of servant-leader—to use the term coined by Robert K. Greenleaf. The facilitator serves the team so they may grow professionally, move toward organizational goals, and grow their own capacity for leadership within the structure of the peer learning team and beyond.

"It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead." –Robert K. Greenleaf.

Jami McCormack is an Assessor and Training Specialist with the McCormick Center.

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