Group Dynamics and Facilitation

The following concepts come from various sources, which originated from the business sector. Although this is the case, the concepts transfer quite well to facilitation of Family Group Decision Making meetings.

Challenges Facilitators May Face

Individual Participant Safety

Even when overall safety and trust is developing well between a facilitator and a case team, there are often times within a meeting when a particular individual within the team is called out for something the team or a team member feels they may need to improve, reducing the sense of safety that person may feel at that time. Facilitators should monitor these situations and choose from a number of facilitation tactics according to the following criteria:

- Is a particular participant showing signs of feeling too unsafe to respond constructively (such as crying, shaking, being excessively quiet or withdrawn, getting deeply red-faced, etc.)?
- Are the crucial conversation tactics being used with a participant relatively constructive and well-meaning (e.g., empathetic vs. rude)?
- If these tactics seem to be escalating, is it because milder forms of communication have not worked with this participant?
- Is the safety and accountability for this participant balancing itself over time? Have they been too safe, over-demonstrating empathy or comfort?
- Are there signs that the team is moving constructively forward from these situations, versus bogging down or regressing (signs of low safety)?

Specific facilitation tactics for redirecting a discussion that may be making one participant feel too unsafe include:

- Revisiting the ground rules to ensure they are being followed or reflecting on initial feelings to note if and how they are changing;
- Stating your observations and concerns directly and in behavioral terms, asking participants to discuss the exchanges they are having and reflecting on their related perceptions and feelings;
- Reminding participants of their shared sense of purpose and shared responsibility for the improvements being discussed;
- Mediate or moderate a discussion between two or more participants, checking in with each person being spoken to immediately afterward;
- Engaging a threatening participant, modeling crucial conversation skills;
- Focusing the group on a topic related closely to the one being addressed;
- Taking a break and shifting into 1-on-1 coaching mode, for a brief period of time.

Jumping to Solutions

Teams who jump to solutions, much like jumping to conclusions, are often disappointed when they monitor the impact of their chosen solutions later on. This facilitator challenge is most likely to arise when teams have not yet finished the information sharing phase of the Family Group Decision Making meeting and want to rush to solutions, as this can be a natural tendency. Facilitators should use the following reflective questions to determine how and when to redirect the team's natural tendencies:

- Is the team opening up with each other about the full range of its improvement priorities and gaps?
- Did the team want to rush through initial feelings and ground rules?

The following questions may be considered if you have been provided knowledge surrounding these topics prior to the meeting.

- Does the team have a proven track record of solving complex problems?
- Does the team have a general history of acting before reflecting?
- Does the team monitor its plans and commitments effectively and with good energy?
- Is the team overly task-oriented, or do they demonstrate tendencies towards either a micromanagement or lax culture?

Relationship and Task Balance

Teams often demonstrate an initial imbalance between building effective relationships and accomplishing tasks. Facilitators can use any number of tactics to help their teams achieve a general balance between or even an integration of these two general performance factors, including the following:

- Establish a collective vision for why things need to get done (*i.e.,* agree upon Purpose Statement);
- Using the trust topic to initiate discussions about both building effective relationships and accomplishing tasks;
- Helping teams make connections between building effective relationships and accomplishing tasks through wall visuals, videos, readings and models;
- Turning "I want" viewpoints into discussions about how others feel and what they want, towards a "we want" viewpoint;
- Using crucial conversations to challenge gaps in following through on tasks;
- Having participants be more active in the room by directly asking non-active participants for their feedback; and
- Letting teams discuss feelings of failure, helping them reframe as temporary passages they go through towards making improvements.

Group Dynamics and Facilitation (cont'd)

Moving In and Out of Tangents

While a responsibility of a facilitator is to keep participants focused on the task at hand, tangents that a team might choose to pursue demonstrate where the team's energies and priorities are. Allowing teams some latitude in this way may also help to build trust and model empowerment. Furthermore, seemingly tangential discussions often lead to insights and considerations that are not tangential. In general, tangents are desirable as long as the facilitator uses reflective questions to make that determination. Below are several examples of reflective questions that a facilitator may ask him or herself:

- Is the team working through an issue or subject progressively or is it spinning its wheels, reiterating the same ideas in a loop or into a dead end?
- Is the team demonstrating a passion or energy for a subject that is worth honoring in and of itself? Are typically reserved participants being energized by the subject?
- Is the team diverting its focus and energies consciously or unconsciously away from the agenda topic or objective at hand, using the tangent as a defensiveness or resistance tactic?
- By the same token do I, as the facilitator, consciously or unconsciously prefer to stay with the tangent?
- Is the team talking conceptually and does the team demonstrate difficulty moving from that approach to getting things done?
- Is the team habitually long-winded and do its members often struggle to articulate their points clearly and concretely?

Source: American Public Human Services Association, 2009.

"Types" of Participants and Methods to Engage Them

Quiet/Shy Participant - a group member is not participating as the facilitator thinks they should. This may be because the participant is:

- shy, timid or insecure
- indifferent to the topics being discussed
- bored
- feeling superior
- distracted by pressing issues outside the meeting
- having trouble understanding the topic under discussion in conflict with other group members

Possible Solutions:

- make eye contact with the participant and ask a simple question

- recognize his/her contribution immediately, sincerely and encourage more
- ask during a break or in private about why the participant is so quiet
- suggest that everyone takes a turn in sharing their opinion

Overly Talkative Participant - a group member monopolizes much of the time speaking and is generally dominant. This may be caused by:

- a natural need for attention
- being overly prepared/unprepared for the meeting
- wanting their opinion to be heard, based on their belief that their opinion is the only one that matters or is accurate
- misuse of authority/perception of having the most authority in the family

Possible Solutions:

- glance at your watch while the participant is speaking
- during a pause for breath, thank the participant for their comments, and restate the agenda
- emphasizing relevant points and time limits
- ask the participant to explain how their comments add value to the topic at hand
- reflect their comments back to the group

Side Conversation Holder - a group member is disrupting the meeting by being involved in too many side conversations. This may be because the participant:

- feels the need to introduce an item not on the agenda
- is bored with the meeting
- is discussing a related topic but not being heard
- is checking in with another team member to see if their idea is worth mentioning to the group
- wants to be the center of attention

Possible Solutions:

- ask the participant to share their idea with the group
- get up and casually walk around near the participants having the side conversation
- call the participant by name and ask if they want to share their thoughts with the group
- restate a recently made point and ask for the participants opinion

Overly Disagreeable Participant - a group member is highly argumentative or generally antagonistic. This may be because they:

- have a combative personality
- are upset by others opinions or a specific issue
- are a show-off by nature
- are unable to make suggestions constructively
- feel that they are being ignored

Possible Solutions:

- paraphrase the participant's comments, and after their response, recap his/her position in objective terms
- find merit in the participant's suggestions, express agreement, then move on
- respond to the participant's comments, not the attack
- open the discussion of the participant's comments to the group

Blair, G. M. (1996, February 23). *Group Facilitation.* Retrieved July 30, 2010, from Science and Engineering at The University of Edinburgh: School of Engineering: http://www.see.ed.ac.uk/~gerard/MENG/MECD/topics.html

Markers of Effective Facilitation

Avoid being prescriptive or overly directive. While classroom trainers are typically viewed as the resident expert for the material being taught, a facilitator should not be viewed that way. The facilitator is instead empowering a team and providing a structure for them to draw upon and supplement its own expertise in the most seamless way possible, in turn establishing the team's buy-in and commitment to its own improvement. This principle informs a number of facilitation techniques, including, for example, how the facilitator flip charts a team's input. Facilitators should adhere to the team's own words and thoughts rather than interpreting, as the facilitator's interpretation may be incorrect, subsequently not meeting the team where they are at (*e.g.,* This may result in rushing them to higher-level work when they are not ready).

Listen actively and constructively. This FGDM process requires the facilitator to concentrate on everything someone is saying, both in content and emotion, note how others in the group are responding, both verbally and non-verbally, make immediate linkages to the individual's and the team's objectives, and then formulate empathic, clear responses and follow-ups that lead to positive, focused energy and evolving data and perspectives within the team.

Introduce new ways of thinking and acting through an inductive process. Facilitators should put participant experiences central to all session agendas and activities, only introducing models, tools and templates that will help the team solve the problems that they are facing. This requires facilitators to hold a wide range of models

and tools in reserve, constantly scanning for which ones would be useful to a given team. In this way, teams immediately apply new ways of thinking and acting because they themselves have identified their relevance and purpose first.

Identify and test constructively apparent issues with the team's level of trust. A good facilitator will leave a team's internal dynamics and patterns of relating to one another in better shape than prior to the facilitation. Trust is about treating each other respectfully, with no hidden agendas, making oneself vulnerable through appropriate self-disclosure, sharing of authority, and following-through reliably on stated commitments. The facilitator should both model each of these characteristics of trust and call them out when they are being either demonstrated or violated by others.

Be sure you and participants alike are feeling okay about everyone else in the room. Open hostility or silent fuming are major detractors from the process, whether on the part of participants or the facilitator, who may at times be openly challenged and debated by participants. If the team feels it needs to tend to the feelings of their facilitator, it will not be as candid and the process will suffer. Feeling okay does not mean being entirely comfortable as the process may at times make participants feel uncomfortable. It means having the ability to be honest and constructive despite feeling this way.

Source: Adapted from American Public Human Services Association, 2009.