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EFFECTIVE FACILITATING SKILLS For Leaders

There is a big difference between a leader who plays the role of subject matter expert

versus one who shapes the process of drawing out ideas from a team. The subject matter expert is one who has the content; he or she tells and teaches the client what to do to fix a problem. The facilitator is one who guides a process and engages the group members to solve the problem themselves with the desired outcome.

As a consultant, I have often been engaged as a facilitator to resolve challenging issues for teams. Here are some effective facilitating skills that I have utilised to get team members to work together productively to achieve their desired goals.

Make everyone feel important and comfortable

One essential gesture to extend to all team members is to recognise their importance as contributors. I often begin a facilitating session by giving each member a V.I.P. name tag and requesting them to write their names on it. I then inform them that V.I.P. stands for Very Important Participant. I explain that everyone's active participation is the key to the success of that session. To level the playing field, encourage diversity – people from different backgrounds, knowledge and experience to share their ideas to help improve the quality of decisions and outcome. Set some mutually agreed ground rules to create an atmosphere of mutual respect, openness and possibilities.

Engage the participants in a professional manner

As a facilitator, one should stay neutral and professional in the conduct of the discussion. Each time a participant suggests an idea or provides an input, thank him or her for it. Recognise each and every one's effort in the participation and sharing. Balance out the active participants with the non-active ones. Call on some of those quiet ones for their views in a friendly manner. Maintain an atmosphere of calm, courtesy and mutual respect for each other. Occasionally, inject some positivity and humour to lighten things up should the discussion start to get negative and antagonistic.

Throw some light on the matter

Often, a discussion can come to a standstill as people are in the dark over some issues. An effective facilitator is fully prepared and is ready to provide examples from



other companies or the industry to provide insights into the issue. For example, while discussing one critical issue facing the company and one member suggested that the team should look at staff turnover as it was high. However, when it was pointed out by the facilitator that the company's staff turnover of three per cent is lower than the average industry staff turn over of seven per cent, the discussion then moved on to touch other more challenging issues. It is useful for the facilitator to have updated information on the products, services, markets, regulations, technology, economic and social trends, as well as benchmarking data of the industry.

Listen and paraphrase

Often, the art of getting people to think out of the box is to listen to all "stalemate assertions" and then paraphrase with questions to open up with discussion on possibilities.

Here are some examples:

Stalemate assertion: The reason we cannot increase our sales is because management has cut the budget on advertisement and

promotion.

Paraphrase question: What other ways can we increase sales besides advertisement and promotion?

Stalemate assertion: Our customer complaints go up because there is a backlog of sales support due to shortage of support staff and management is not keen on hiring.

Paraphrase question: What innovative or creative ways can we come up with to address the sales backlog with the current staff force?

Guide the group when they go off tangent and focus on the desired outcome

It is human tendency to go off tangent in a discussion. An effective leader knows how to listen and look out for such signs and politely request the person to come back to the point of discussion. Psychologists have explained this phenomena of going off tangent as an escapism syndrome to avoid addressing difficult subjects or the pressing matter on hand. The facilitator can ease the tension by openly reckoning that the discussion although difficult and

sensitive, is needed if they are to come out stronger and better. The key role of the facilitator is to get people to actively participate in discussions to arrive at the desired outcome.

Ensure quality contribution and decisions

Having active participation is not enough. The facilitator must ensure that quality ideas discussed that can lead to better decisions. The facilitator's role is critical to provoke thinking and extract the best ideas from participants. The facilitator is not just addressing the ideas that are there, but also great ideas that have not been brought up. For example, a facilitator leading a banking group discussion on the threats of competitors asked the participants whether they have thought of cryptocurrencies as their competitors. If so, how could they address them.

Addressing and resolving conflicts

Perhaps one of the most valuable contributions of a facilitator is to address and resolve conflict in a team discussion. Often, it is difficult to internally sort things out on their own and that's why such a team needs a facilitator. The facilitator needs to employ conflict resolution strategies to help people come to an agreement amicably. And to do that, he or she must remain professional and non-political and rise above the fray to focus on the common good for the company and the desired outcome, as agreed by all.



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