

Facilitation is a Leadership Skill

By Beatrice Briggs

Today's leaders do not have followers, they have teams. These teams need effective leadership, but not of the old, top-down kind. They need leaders who can bring the team together to clarify goals, set priorities, assess progress, seek solutions for problems, assign tasks and be accountable to one another.

Simply being the boss is not enough

Team leaders and others in positions of responsibility for delivering results must convene and facilitate meetings, face to face and/or virtual spaces where relevant information is shared, dialogue and debate are encouraged, and decisions are made.

Yet too often team meetings are a frustrating waste of time and energy for all concerned.

To transform this dismal situation, leaders need the mindset and skills of a process facilitator.

A leader who realizes that “we need everyone's contribution to be effective”, will plan meetings that elicit this collective intelligence and bring it to bear on the challenges the team faces.

Are we talking about “soft skills?”

Facilitation requires an understanding of group dynamics, organizational change and complexity theory. While facilitation is not “hard” in the sense that building construction, mechanical engineering or information technology are, it requires a set of skills that professionals in almost any field can use.

The facilitation skills needed by leaders include:

- Defining the purpose of the meeting
- Designing a results-based agenda
- Reaching agreement on how the group will work together
- Encouraging the participation of all team members
- Modeling effective listening
- Being genuinely open to the ideas of others
- Identifying and transforming conflict
- Dealing with “difficult participants”
- Clarifying next steps, assigning action items
- Carrying out the decision-making process
- Conducting evaluation of the group's process

Becoming competent in these skills can reduce wasted time, improve team communication, encourage creativity and support collaboration. Given that meetings are a fact of life in every organization, leaders should be prepared to make them as dynamic and productive as possible. Learning the basics of facilitation is a good place to begin.