

The new leader is a facilitator, not an order giver.

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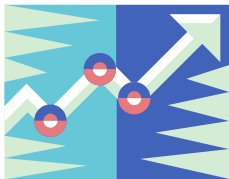
Module Three: Process vs. Content

Facilitators are process experts; they are as interested in the “how?” as much as the “what?” To produce quality output, you must arrive at it functionally. In this module, we will discuss the difference between process and content, and which among the two should be a facilitator’s focus.



About Process

Process refers to the way a discussion is happening, independent of the subject matter or issue being talked about. Basically, process talks about how a group works together. It includes how members talk to each other, how they identify and solve problems, how they make decisions, and how they handle conflict. It takes into account group dynamics, non-verbal messages, and situational elements.



Process elements include:

- **Meeting Flow.** How does the meeting begin? How do they transition to another item in the agenda? Who keeps the ball rolling? Are there topic jumps? How does the meeting end?
- **Participation.** How many people contribute to the discussion? What is the quality of their contribution? Are there highs, lows, and shifts in group participation? How are silent people treated?
- **Communication.** How do group members communicate with one another? Is the verbal communication congruent with the non-verbal communication? Who talks with whom? Who interrupts whom?
- **Roles.** What roles do each member of the group play? Are these roles self-assigned or assigned by others? Are the roles productive? How do the members of the group respond to these roles?
- **Power/Influence.** Who has high influence? Who can move the group into a particular action whether positive or negative? How do they exert this power? Is the group democratic,

authoritarian, or permissive when it comes to discussions? Are there shifts in power/influence? Are there rivalries? Do there seem to be coalitions and alliances?

- **Problem-Solving Process.** Is the problem stated in clear workable terms? Does it seem clear to everyone what the issue is? How does the group arrive at solution? Is this method acceptable and fair to all members?
- **Decision-Making Process.** How are the best interests of all participants represented in the decision making process? Are there self-authorized decision-makers? Does the group arrive at a consensus? Is the way of deciding acceptable to all members of the group? How are people who disagree with the majority treated?
- **Group Atmosphere.** What is the general feeling in the group? How are feelings handled? Are they encouraged and validated? Is this group capable of care? Are there significant emotional attachments between members?

About Content

Content refers to the subject matter of a discussion: the actual words or ideas that were spoken independent of contextual variables like non-verbal cues and procedural variables. It refers mainly to

the literal meaning of words and makes no reference to connotations, subtexts, and insinuations behind messages.



In a meeting, content are the agenda topic, the suggestions put forward by the staff members, the solutions they arrive at. Content in a facilitated discussion should *all* come from the group and not the facilitator.

Example: The content of the meeting may be “how to change the company’s image to that it will appeal to a younger market.” In contrast the process element in the same meeting is brainstorming to solicit as many options as possible.

A Facilitator's Focus



Which between process and content should a group facilitator attend to?

Ideally, a facilitator should attend to both process and content. After all, process and content feed one another. Good meeting processes create better content; keeping to relevant content makes for a great discussion process. A productive discussion can only happen when the content is on track and the

meeting flows in a functional way.

However, facilitators are primarily process experts; they manage information flow and treatment. They are not encouraged to provide content input in anyway. While some knowledge of a meeting's topic can help a facilitator manage a meeting better, a facilitator should not put forward personal opinions and suggestions, or make judgments and decisions for the group. They're also content neutral; they should never take sides in a debate.

When a facilitator adds to the content of a discussion, the facilitator's role is confused from neutral guide to biased participant or a trainer/ coach. If a content expert is needed (one whose task is to clarify technical issues in a discussion e.g. a lawyer for union issues, or an Organizational Development consultant), they can be included as participant in the group for expert reference.

Here is an example of a facilitator focusing primarily on process instead of content:

Imagine that a group discussion is stuck. The group can't seem to generate a good, viable idea for their project. A content expert in this situation can provide a range of alternatives they can try--- after all he or she has specialized knowledge in this area. But a facilitator is a process expert. Instead of giving suggestions, a facilitator would seek to identify why idea generation is not proceeding well. Maybe the group is tired? Maybe the problem needs to be re-defined? In these cases, a facilitator can encourage a working break to get the thinking juices flowing, or ask the group to re-define the problem to encourage a different perspective, respectively.

Case Study

Thomas had the focus of a laser. He'd done his homework and had a plan that could rival any natural born leaders plan. In the palms of his hands, he carried the message that he'd convinced himself would change the way things were done. He dubbed himself, "The Facilitator" and couldn't wait to share his knowledge with his coworkers. Tracy walked by and noticed Thomas' peculiar get-up. "What's with the cape," she asked. Thomas firmly planted his feet on the ground and said, "I'm The Facilitator." Tracy shrugged and moved on. Thomas' voice boomed out. He didn't understand why no one else questioned him. Tracy raised her voice and explained that leaders lead by example, not because of a fancy superhero suit.