

FINDING THE RIGHT FACILITATOR

What are the Traits of a Great Facilitator?

1. Excellent communicator
2. Good listener
3. Quick thinker
4. Lateral thinker; good at connecting ideas and finding synergies
5. Open-minded and inclusive in dealing with groups and ideas
6. Knows trust and the relationship are essential for success in dealing with people
7. Understands group dynamics
8. Fair
9. Trustworthy
10. Takes ownership of the process
11. Understands the process and knows where it needs to go
12. Committed to getting the best outcome from the process without controlling the outcome
13. Will not give up control of the process
14. Does not take challenges to the process or ideas personally
15. Knows how to keep a group on task
16. Great at asking questions and questioning the answers and seeking validation for the answers
17. Enthusiastic
18. Inspirational
19. Humorous
20. Objective
21. Confident
22. Humble
23. Conscious of time and its value
24. Good at leading brainstorming
25. Good at driving prioritization and choices
26. Does not need the approval of the group he or she is facilitating

What Does a Facilitator Do?

1. Takes responsibility for the process, not the answers
2. Keeps the group on task, focused on the process and achieving its intended conclusion
3. Evokes ideas
4. Gets wide and continuing participation from the participants
5. Protects ideas when they are emergent
6. Parks ideas that are not relevant or on task
7. Keeps checking and testing the understanding
8. Rephrases, restates, connects and summarizes
9. Forces choices and prioritization
10. Builds understanding, consensus and commitment
11. Nails down follow-up
12. Celebrates progress

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Who Should Facilitate Strategic Planning?

Simply put, planning is best led by an outside facilitator. He or she comes not being biased by the organization's prior commitments and culture, and can see things in the organization and in the environment that insiders will be blind to or overly discount.

The organizational leader (or his or her surrogate) is the wrong person to lead the planning process. When he or she appears to have it right, things seem great, even though the organization could be seriously sub-maximizing. When he or she has it wrong, the results can be devastating.

While business and non-profit organizations like other sectors of society have their stars and leaders who having followings and gain great praise, too often the force of the boss's personality can be an impediment in getting the organization to the right place for the best results.

What a strong leader can bring to an organization is undisputable:

- Strategic clarity and consistency
- Focusing management and workers on what's important
- Establishing and maintaining an effective culture
- Providing the drive and incentives to achieve implementation
- Visibility in key markets and with stakeholders, investors and the media

These outcomes and more are what a strong leader can provide the organization. Certainly Bill Gates or earlier Jack Welch have been strong leaders who drove Microsoft and General Electric to great success by these measures.

But a "leader-based organization" has two inherent weaknesses.

First, a "leader-based organization" depends much on the leader being right. The organization is oriented to "follow the leader." This means the organization can be led to Steve Jobs/Apple-like success, or it can be led to Eddie Lampert/Sears-like disappointing results and possible failure.

Ultimately, these kinds of leaders are shown to be wrong and are shown the door - with recognition that it does not always work this way in our perverse CEO culture where the CEO's job is not always at risk when the organization goes into a tailspin.

The second weakness of the "leader-based organization" is more pernicious and much harder to see. It is the curse of "sub-maximization." Simply, might an organization that taps more of the knowledge, expertise and vision of its management and workforce in a dynamic process perform better over time than an organization dominated by a single leader?

Research confirms that committees make better decisions than individuals. Who's to say that even a Microsoft might be delivering better results today had it had a little less Bill Gates and a little more "team" and process along the way. I certainly can't say...but we can speculate. That's why the real success of leader-based organizations is so hard to sort out. You get what you get from leader. You know when it's good...but is it the best that could be had?

The answer on who should facilitate? Get an outside facilitator. If an inside person must be used, tap someone who is not the organizational leader but has enough standing to question and "stand up to" the top person.