

Facilitation Online

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The way people operate and connect with one another is changing due to technology. Facilitation online is an evolving area and presents an expanding opportunity of empowering groups to work collaboratively across time and distance through technology. Online facilitation has many unique differences and challenges to those in face-to-face groups. These differences require both different applications of offline facilitation techniques along with some additional unique approaches. For example there is often a need for facilitators to act as guides as well as facilitators and knowledge of technology and familiarity with an online set up are imperative (White 2000). Group dynamics in the online environment combined with new communication technologies create unique conditions and opportunities calling for innovative techniques for the facilitation of groups online (White 2001a). These facilitative techniques and skills are not yet well established.

In face-to-face settings facilitators operate within the emergence of group interaction (Hunter et al. 1997). An experienced facilitator has a whole toolkit of processes that can be used to allow a group to access and foster this emergence. It is unknown whether the use of traditional face-to-face techniques can be as effective online. Existing research indicates that communication is less effective online, therefore, effective facilitation may be more important to the success of online groups.

What is currently understood from online facilitation research is that many of the tools available are not as effective as those used with face-to-face groups. This is discussed further with some instances of known factors impacting online facilitation. Some suggestions for facilitating online are then outlined.

Online facilitation tools

There are a variety of software tools designed to assist meeting processes. As these technologies are new and little information exists to guide facilitators as to best practice for conducting virtual facilitation

(Mittleman et al. 2000). These online facilitation tools can provide tremendous advantages for meeting productivity and results, but do not provide the sophistication required to facilitate at the same levels that can be achieved face-to-face. While online facilitators do have some tools to use, they fail in comparison to what can be achieved in face-to-face situations (Boetcher et al. 1999).

Online factors

There are many online factors that influence the decision options available to facilitators; some factors create new ways of connection that have never been available before while others, such as a lack of physical cues, impede the communication processes. There are a few understandings gained from the facilitation of online groups. The main differences are the lack of physical clues, time variance effects, disembodied contact, easy in/out, reliance on text and the constraints of technological tools. These differences make online facilitation more difficult and are introduced here.

Physical cues

Body language, tones of voice and facial expression are some of the elements of face-to-face groups that are not present in an online environment (Boetcher et al. 1999). Facilitation relies on the intricacies and connection of the body and its complex ways of communication. These elements normally provide a range of feedback to both the speaker and receivers of communication to complete the understanding of a single message. Communicating online however, requires more explicit writing and reading to ensure communication is complete (White 2001a). Beneficial tone of voice is also missing; this may lead to different or unclear interpretations of messages received.

Interaction delay

The delay between interactions or 'time variance' can create a sensation of "being alone" for some members who experience the interaction as too

slow. Online groups establish their own interaction times and some groups may be highly active while others are less so. This delay in responses can also have positive effects, people can think and consider before responding. They have the opportunity to consider how to best reply and to create deeper meaning with the messages being sent.

Disembodied interaction

Online interactions are disembodied or anonymous in form, influencing the interaction between members of an online group. “It is not unusual to have someone behave outside his or her usual social “norms” online because of disembodiment” (White 2001a).

Easy in/easy out

A phenomenon called “easy in/easy out” is experienced with online groups. Online the interaction associated with entering and leaving is less obvious. “In larger groups you aren’t “missed” and certainly no one sees you “walk out the door” as in a face-to-face setting” (White, 2001a). Online members may be passive participants, in similar ways to face-to-face settings, reading postings but not contributing. Speculative figures suggest that around 10% of an online group’s membership make up 90% of the community activity (White, 2001b).

Reliance on text

Reliance on text to communicate is a strong factor influencing how members communicate online. While less agile writers and those with strong visual or oral modes are disadvantaged, others that are strong literary communicators have more opportunity to communicate using their strength.

Technological tools

Knowledge of technology and familiarity with the online set-up are imperative for participants. For many participants, online interaction is a

new experience. Participants have to contend with both learning to use the system as well as communicating in the meeting or with the group. Facilitators can often act as technology guides as well as facilitating the group. A learning curve is involved as participants' abilities to use and learn complex online tools differ. The use of technology places a burden on both the facilitator to train the users and the participants to learn to use technology whilst still maintaining communication with the group.

Facilitation Suggestions

Following are some suggestions for facilitators and group-workers when working with online groups.

Facilitating feedback

There are some ways that facilitation can be applied to generate greater feedback from members. The facilitator can encourage and model responding to messages by using members' names. This helps individualise messages and reminds the other members of the names of the others in the group. The facilitator can directly challenge the group by asking members about their accountability for contribution. The facilitator can ask members to share withholds (Hunter et al. 1997), anything that is holding back their full participation. Silent members can be asked for their perspectives or to comment on the level of contribution that the group is experiencing. The facilitator can ask members why certain questions have not been responded to. There may be a need to offer other ways that the group can contribute. For example, some members may not have strong textual skills and prefer to use audio or video conferencing.

Facilitating ways of communicating

The facilitator may need to interrupt poor use of text such as the use of capital letters - which can be interpreted as shouting by some, abbreviations for words - not everyone may know what the abbreviations are, slang - again not everyone may know it, and long delays before responses - which may frustrate some who want a timely responses.

Time interaction differences may be addressed within the group's culture. However, these may be difficult to put into effect or limit the way some group members prefer to contribute. Areas for further research may lie in understanding online communication manners and mapping these to commonalities such as personality and learning styles may highlight ways to facilitate certain ways of interacting online.

Facilitating technology learning

Facilitators cannot assume that all members are capable of using the tools; a technology learning curve is involved with any online tools applied in group processes. The first intervention may be to make sure there is no easier way to accomplish the task. Facilitating a face-to-face meeting or using same-time telephone conferencing may be more appropriate to meeting the group's purpose. In my experience, creating space at the beginning of any online group focusing on learning to use the tools is in-itself a relationship-building exercise. Members create links with each other and some steps are made towards the development of culture setting.

It is very useful to create illustrated 'How to' documents for using the tools such as the document created to show members how to create mail rules and folders within MS Outlook. Online field trips or online tutorials can be held outside the discussion area to collectively explore new tools.

Facilitating interpretation of communication

Facilitators need to be aware that one member's communication can influence others. In one group I observed, one member started posting houses for rent, shortly after others began posting other things for sale this broke up the discussion and the facilitator needed to intervene and remind the group of its purpose and culture. A prompt facilitator's response may be required to further clarify the interpretation of messages. To further avoid misinterpretation the facilitator should explain exactly how a suggested process will work and seek feedback for

understanding. It may be useful to have a facilitation coach proofread any messages or interventions before posting to the group.

The facilitator can intervene for clarification of other member's messages if they are unclear, this will avoid other group members misinterpreting the message. One useful approach is to re-use exact wording when responding to specific messages, another may be to ask others how they have understood the messages. It may be useful for the facilitator to have messages printed out and in front of them when responding. This keeps the message detail clearly in front and lowers the reliance on memory of what was posted.

Conclusion

While there are many differences in facilitating online as apposed to in-person, the basic facilitative processes of creating purpose and setting the group culture still remain as important. In making online groups effective the facilitator plays an important and pivotal role. Therefore, the online facilitator needs to be aware of what is likely to occur when using an online environment. The key thing to remember is that an online group is still a group, and online facilitation is still facilitation. So use and build on the suggestions introduced in this paper and continue on your path to facilitating more effective online groups.

References

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