

Ohio Association of  
School Business Officials

MARCH 2024

# sbo quarterly



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## COMMUNICATION & LEADERSHIP

# Facilitation Excellence: Unlocking the Power of Effective Group Dynamics

These eight domains are the key to unlocking the power of effective dynamics.

**Facilitation is a critical skill** that empowers groups to achieve their goals by harnessing the collective intelligence and creativity of their members. A skilled facilitator serves as a guide, creating an environment that fosters collaboration, inclusivity, and productivity. Leveraging eight key domains of facilitation as summarized by myself and Aaron Wolowiec, let's explore the primary elements of facilitation excellence and how they contribute to successful group outcomes.

### 1. DEVELOPING COLLABORATIVE STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS

Facilitators must lay a strong foundation by establishing collaborative stakeholder relationships. This involves clarifying the key questions the facilitation should answer, developing mutual commitment on a written scope of work and shared values, and defining tasks, deliverables, roles, and responsibilities. Additionally, a comprehensive evaluation plan should be developed to gather 360-degree feedback during and after the facilitation, ensuring continuous improvement.



## 2. CREATING A PARTICIPATORY ENVIRONMENT

To unlock the full potential of a group, facilitators must create an environment that encourages active participation. This includes designing pre-work materials, holding participant orientations, and managing the physical or virtual space effectively. In every session we facilitate, we always start by establishing group norms and expectations, and then look to employ differentiated engagement strategies to speak to varied learning styles. A participatory environment is one where there is a baseline priority of effective communication and one where active listening skills are an expectation of all participants. Ultimately, intentional activities that promote listening and learning from one another should be incorporated, while managing disruptive individuals and resolving conflicts to maintain a productive atmosphere.

## 3. CREATING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT THAT HONORS DIVERSITY

Facilitators must approach their work through an equity lens to create a safe and inclusive space for all participants. This involves establishing a common understanding of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) language, incorporating organization-specific DEIB values, and implementing techniques that center marginalized voices. In many meetings there can be unbalanced power dynamics – a responsible facilitator should manage oppressive behavior, and create an environment that is accessible to all participants.

## 4. ESTABLISHING CONTEXT AND CLEAR AIMS

Setting the stage is crucial for participants to understand the purpose and expectations of the facilitation. Facilitators should seek and incorporate participant needs and perspectives, identify measures of success, and communicate the reason and context for convening. Clearly articulating the purpose, process, timeframes, and expected outcomes at the outset of the facilitation helps align the group and establish a shared understanding.

## 5. DEVELOPING A CUSTOMIZED DESIGN AND FACILITATION PLAN

Facilitators need to carefully design and execute facilitation plans that meet stakeholder needs and goals. This involves selecting appropriate facilitation methods, scheduling activities effectively, identifying necessary resources, and drawing out group insights

through structured dialogues. Assessing and communicating group progress, recognizing tangents, and providing guidance on exploring or tabling ideas are additional skills that facilitate effective group decision-making.

## 6. CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT EVOKES CREATIVITY

Facilitators play a vital role in fostering creativity within groups. Engaging participants' senses, utilizing visual aids, and leveraging activities that encourage creative thinking are effective techniques. Additionally, incorporating curiosity, discovery, and inquiry as tools of exploration enhances mutual understanding and problem-solving. Facilitators should create an atmosphere that encourages innovative thinking and nurtures a culture of creativity. We have five senses – the more of them that can be engaged, the more likely a session is to be compelling.

## 7. SUPPORTING IMPLEMENTATION THROUGH QUALITY DOCUMENTATION

Facilitators must ensure successful implementation by providing appropriate planning, documentation, and follow-through. This includes keeping records of key decisions, developing clear action items and timelines, and facilitating closure, reflection, and celebration aligned with desired outcomes. Producing concise, complete, and timely documentation supports implementation efforts and provides a reference for future actions.

## 8. BUILDING AND MAINTAINING PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDE

Facilitation is a lifelong learning pursuit. Those that choose to pursue facilitation expertise should continuously expand their knowledge by staying updated with best practices and adding new methods and techniques to their repertoire. Engaging in practice, observation, feedback, and peer mentoring/coaching enhances facilitation skills. Facilitators should also practice self-assessment, self-awareness, and goal setting for continuous growth. Maintaining integrity, trust, and rapport with participants and co-facilitators, adopting an objective and non-judgmental stance, and championing the facilitation journey of others are essential elements of facilitation excellence.

Facilitation excellence lies at the heart of successful group outcomes. By incorporating the core competencies of a facilitator, such as developing collaborative stakeholder relationships, creating a participatory and inclusive environment, establishing context, designing customized plans, fostering creativity, supporting implementation, and maintaining professional growth, facilitators can unlock the full potential of groups. As facilitators continue to refine their skills and embrace the principles of facilitation excellence, they empower groups to achieve collective success and create positive change in their organizations and communities. – LOWELL APLEBAUM / Vista Cova & AARON WOLOWIEC / Event Garde

