

Expect Facilitation to be Challenging

While facilitators should always be optimistic and hope that things run smoothly, it's always important to be totally realistic about the potential for encountering difficult situations. If you have facilitated for any length of time, you have probably already experienced many of the things that can go wrong. A few of these things are as follows:

- Groups often attempt to deal with an unrealistic number of items, which causes members to scramble from topic to topic.
- Many meetings are designed without paying adequate attention to the process or exactly how each agenda item will be handled.
- Meetings can derail when they lack the guiding help of a neutral facilitator.
- Many work groups have never received training on how to participate effectively in meetings, so they exhibit patterns of dysfunctional behavior.
- Some individuals who behave well in one-on-one settings have a tendency to act out in group settings.
- Many managers resist all forms of structure because they feel that it constrains them, or inhibits discussion.
- Front-line staffers, who are accustomed to traditional top-down management styles, may not view group decision making as part of their job. Or they may feel they aren't paid enough to perform these functions.
- An organizational pattern of downsizing, continual change and poor follow-through on past initiatives may leave employees cynical and resistant.
- The people who request facilitation support often lack a clear understanding of what facilitation is; they actually may end up competing with the facilitator or interfering with the role.

Operating Under Mistaken Assumptions

As facilitators, we often contribute to meeting problems by operating under mistaken assumptions. Facilitators always want to believe that people come to meetings in a positive frame of mind and that they are highly motivated. In today's high-pressure workplace, however, these assumptions may be unrealistic and naive. That's not to suggest that facilitators should become cynics. It's just that facilitation needs to be tempered with a dose of reality.

To assure you are in tune with today's workplace challenges, check to be sure that you aren't operating under any of these 10 mistaken assumptions:

Mistaken Assumption #1- People want to be at the meeting.

In most organizations, people are pressed for time and stressed like never before. This means they don't have the time or the energy to sit through meetings that don't yield results. In today's climate, it's wise to assume that the participants are not thrilled to be there and need opening activities that create buy-in.

Mistaken Assumption #2 - Everyone is clear on the purpose of the meeting.

Even when an agenda's been circulated ahead of time, it's amazing how many people remain confused about the meeting's purpose. To make matters worse, meetings commonly shift focus as they progress, which compounds the confusion. It's best to assume that people *don't* know why they're there and to start with a review of the agenda. During the meeting, it is wise to reconfirm the goal periodically to ensure that group members are still aligned.

Mistaken Assumption #3 - There are no distractions, baggage or historical precedents blocking participation.

Given the amount of turbulence in the workplace, it is important to recognize that people's minds may be elsewhere. If a lay-off, personnel change or major restructuring is rumored, or has been recently announced, people may be deeply distracted or even distraught. In these cases, it's important to start with an activity that lets people vent their concerns before moving into the formal agenda.

Mistaken Assumption #4 - People understand the role and powers of a facilitator and are ready and eager to be facilitated.

Facilitation is still a vague and poorly understood concept to many people. If a group's leader is present, members may be confused about how their leader and the meeting facilitator will cooperate without competing. If you're facilitating your workgroup, or even if you're an outsider, members are probably wondering what gave you the authority to manage the proceedings. It is wise to assume, therefore, that people need a clear explanation of the facilitator's role and what you'll be doing to support their efforts.

Mistaken Assumption #5 - The people at the meeting are appropriately empowered to make decisions and act on agenda items.

People often meet assuming that they're making a decision when they're actually only being asked for their opinion. Other times, groups are asked to deliberate on matters that have already been decided. In either case, group members may end up feeling distrustful and manipulated. Unless addressed, this undercurrent of discontent will reverberate throughout any future meetings. So, it is important that facilitators always clarify the extent of the group's decision-making power and to identify any constraints placed on the decision process.

Mistaken Assumption #6 - There are no political or interpersonal factors operating behind the scenes.

While we may imagine that an agenda is accurate, the real agenda is often hidden. It's always far safer to assume that there are political or interpersonal elements operating behind the scenes. The savvy facilitator does his or her homework in advance to learn about those undercurrents to avoid being caught off-guard and he or she knows strategies to safely surface hidden motives.

Mistaken Assumption #7 - Neutral means unassertive.

Too many facilitators act as though their neutrality about the content of the agenda also means they have to stay neutral on the process. The opposite is true; the facilitator should be directive on process issues. Besides selecting the approaches, facilitators also need to point out process problems and to redirect dysfunctional behavior. In other words, effective facilitators know how to be appropriately assertive on the process without compromising their neutrality about the content.

Mistaken Assumption # 8 – I have to put up with their behavior.

Nowhere is it written that facilitators are expected to suffer abuse at the hands of ill-behaved groups, no matter what their rank or perception of self-importance. All facilitators have the right to expect a high level of civility from everyone. Facilitators also need to know that it is appropriate to walk away from an assignment if a group is excessively dysfunctional and resists all interventions.

Mistaken Assumption #9 – I'm experienced; I'll just wing it!

Aside from small, impromptu facilitations, process leaders always need to do their homework and create a detailed meeting design that includes alternative activities. Such preparation instills confidence and offers fall-back strategies if the initial meeting design doesn't work. It's better to have a well-thought-through plan with options, than to expect to be able to come up with process alternatives in the middle of a meeting on the skids.

Mistaken Assumption #10 – It's my fault things didn't work out!

When things go wrong, it's very common for facilitators to blame themselves. This ignores the fact that it may be the group that's underperforming, or that the meeting goal may have been inappropriate. It is always a better strategy to seek objective feedback and analyze what really went wrong before engaging in self-defeating thoughts that undermine personal confidence.

This list of mistaken assumptions can serve every facilitator as a checklist during the design phase. To help you develop strategies to deal with them, the interventions described later on in this chapter address these various mistaken assumptions as they manifest in specific situations.
