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# Facilitation Skills Just Might Be The Best Kept Leadership Secret



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When most professionals think of leadership skills, they tend to think of topics like conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, people management, problem solving, strategic thinking, project management, etc. Most of us don't readily think of facilitation skills, but maybe we should. As a corporate trainer who has taught many traditional leadership topics for nearly two

decades, I've consistently marveled at how facilitation skills tend to be the superpower that flies under the radar...unfortunately.

Early in my career when I worked as a certified business strategy consultant with a Fortune 10 company, I was fortunate enough to attend an intensive three-day facilitation skills training workshop. Hands down, it was the best training of my career. I learned not just the mechanics of how to run an efficient and effective meeting but more importantly how to address dysfunctional behavior within a group, how to help guide a group towards a goal, how to encourage balanced participation during a discussion and how to help a group **generate creative ideas** and reach consensus on a decision. So often, over the course of my career I've been part of group session that's gone off the rails, and invariably I'm the only one in the room equipped with an arsenal of techniques designed to get things back on track.

One of the reasons why facilitation skills may not be acknowledged as readily as other leadership skills may be that they're frequently misunderstood. While facilitators are often associated with sticky notes, timers and parking lots, the role of the facilitator is much broader. The Association for Talent Development **defines facilitation** as "the act of engaging participants in creating, discovering, and applying learning insights." Viewed through this broader lens, it's clear that these skills are invaluable for virtually any leader. Author of the bestselling textbook *Facilitating with Ease!*, Ingrid Bens, M. Ed, insists, "When leaders start to use facilitation techniques to manage their meetings, they will soon discover that facilitation is actually not a "touchy-feely," nice to have frill but an essential tool for bringing much needed structure to their work with their people."

Not surprisingly, the **International Association of Facilitators** (IAF) insists that facilitative leadership is a particularly successful leadership approach. Host of IAF's Facilitation Impact Awards, Jeffer London explains that facilitative leaders use an inclusive style to tap individual potential. "They

co-create and collaborate in order to get things done,” explains London. “The projects of facilitative leaders are done in an iterative manner that allows all individuals to contribute, evaluate and improve aspects of shared initiatives.” Furthermore, IAF insists that today’s workplace complexity requires leaders to lean into a more facilitative style. “In a world that can be seen as increasingly fragmented and chaotic, leaders who can build participation, alignment and meaning are finding more success,” insists Vinay Kumar, Chair of the International Association of Facilitators (IAF). “Leaders who understand how to invite people into a participatory environment, and use the group energy to innovate fit well into today’s context. With the world calling for more inclusion and equity, tomorrow’s leaders need to be facilitators.”

Arguably, leaders without formal facilitation training have missed an opportunity to fully or best exploit meetings and group discussions—where most work gets done. “Most leaders continue to run meetings without paying attention to process,” explains Bens. “They fail to understand how to use even the simplest tools to structure decision-making conversations. When people exhibit ineffective behaviors, they don’t know how to redirect them. When a conversation goes off on a tangent, they fail to move the off-topic item into the parking lot.” The truth is that virtually all professionals have seen first-hand how those pesky process inefficiencies that can seem trivial can actually translate into a huge deficit for not just meeting effectiveness but also for overall team and business results.

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Amid the pandemic-induced shift to remote working, many teams and organizations have struggled to make back-to-back virtual calls translate into a productive day. Indeed, keeping projects on track, teams engaged and tasks moving forward really requires enhanced meeting management technique. It's when these virtual calls are on autopilot—no one is really facilitating; everyone is just kicking back and partially participating—that our teams and projects degenerate little by little. Anyone who has led complex meetings remotely knows that those who do it well, don't do so by accident. Invariably, they've learned the facilitation secrets that engage participants, [minimize off-topic tangents](#) and properly address dysfunctional behaviors.

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Facilitation skills are also valuable because they offer leaders an arsenal of techniques that enable them to strike that delicate balance of focusing on task and relationship. “Facilitation skills give leaders an optional approach to dealing with issues that is halfway between being either laissez-faire or directive,” explains Bens. “When leaders understand how to use process, they can offer their people clear process steps they can use to solve problems for themselves. This increases staff autonomy and helps them to create their own capacity for making decisions. The leader helps them by providing a method for arriving at solutions without telling them what to do.” Arguably, the [best leaders](#) are those rare breeds who are able to press the team to

produce its best work while still cultivating and nurturing authentic relationships. While virtually everyone wants to be that type of leader, most of us are naturally programmed to be much more task or relationship focused, and facilitation skills can offer techniques to support a more balanced style.

Invariably, leaders are inundated with skills they're supposed to master, but most of those focus on what they want to achieve. The magic of facilitation skills is that they focus on *how* to achieve those desired goals in a very practical way. While leaders easily spend tens of thousands of hours in meetings and group discussions, very few invest the time to develop the facilitation skills needed to make them more effective. If you haven't taken a course on [leading virtual meetings](#) or [facilitation skills](#) more generally, take one. You'll be glad you did.

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