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# *Facilitating: A New Breed of Consultant*

*Veteran organizational strategist and executive coach John Kuypers describes this powerful form of consulting, where an unbiased facilitator is able to rapidly and expertly draw out answers and commitments from work teams. Facilitating works because the answers come from managers and staff, not from outside “experts” ...*

I remember when I took my eighteen-month old son ice skating for the first time. As I put his skates on, he gave me a quizzical look that said, “Daddy, what the heck are you doing to my feet?” Then I sat him on the ice and let him touch the ice. This time his look said, “What the heck is this strange feeling?” After a couple of minutes, I picked him up in my arms and began to skate freely. The wind rushed across his face and I let him feel the tug from the centrifugal force of my turns. He began to laugh and laugh. When I stopped, he looked at me with his big, blue eyes said just one word. “WOW!”

Facilitating has that WOW! effect too. It is the least-known and biggest opportunity for effectively using an outside resource for your management challenges. Facilitating can break open work-teams that are paralyzed, strategies that are stuck and morale that is low. Let’s look at facilitating through asking these five questions.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. How is facilitating different?</li><li>2. Does Facilitating really work?</li><li>3. What makes a good facilitator?</li><li>4. What are the best situations to use a facilitator?</li><li>5. What are the main limitations of facilitating?</li></ol> |
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1. How is Facilitating different? Managers use outside experts to help them increase their organization’s *ability to perform*. Facilitating achieves that same goal, but in a different way. Facilitators possess the skill of leading people to discover their own answers. Facilitating meets people where they are, not where the leader wants them to be, or wishes they were. Facilitating is a form of coaching for groups. It differs from traditional consulting, training and speaking for that reason. Let’s look at how.

**Consulting is where you hire someone to tell you the answer.** This is what is commonly practiced by

McKinsey, Boston Consulting, KPMG and other management consulting firms. Their goal is provide you with the expertise that you don’t have in-house. They gather facts and do the analysis. Then they write and present their findings. Their thinking is often brilliant. The challenge is in getting it implemented. Their reports gather dust all too often.

**Training increases the skills and knowledge of your people.** Trainers are the “How To” experts – how to make a presentation, manage time, close sales and manage people, for example. Trainers share their significant knowledge and skills, without knowing a lot about individual job situations. The challenge for trainers is to get the students to *apply* the learning to their jobs. Studies show that only 10% of training is retained and applied on the job.

**Speaking motivates your people to perform at a higher level.** Speakers know how to help people see their situation from a whole new perspective. They inspire people to reach higher performance levels, like making that one extra sales call per day! The challenge with motivational speakers is how to make the inspiration last.

Each of these outside experts has a place in helping a company achieve its goals. Facilitating is one more means with its own unique advantages and disadvantages.

2. Does facilitating really work? Facilitated workshops are based on real-world, current problems and opportunities in the business. That’s the foundation. As a result, there are three immediate benefits:

**1. Facilitating gets fast, practical solutions.** Properly set up, with the decision-makers present, one group of knowledgeable people can make significant, well-thought out decisions in as little as one afternoon. Spaced repetition of short, targeted workshops is also powerful. In a short time, I’ve seen hundreds of future hours saved and millions of future

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profits earned. It's a small investment with a large return.

**2. Participants become committed to implementing.** They own the output which by itself is powerful. But even moreso, workshops allow the hidden barriers to success to come out. I'm referring to the unspoken political & personal reasons why people often resist the same, good idea when it's proposed by top management or an outside consultant. These barriers either get addressed or the idea gets killed. Either way, participants commit to taking action they believe in, right in front of each other.

**3. They learn so much more.** Instead of the consultants walking away as experts on your business, the employees walk away more knowledgeable. They learn from each other, cross functionally. They learn new skills because the process is open and happens live in front of their eyes. There is no black box. The learning sticks because it's so relevant.

3. What makes a good facilitator? Good facilitators possess three critical success characteristics:

**1. They know how to structure the process clearly, yet flexibly.** Facilitators don't have to be experts in your business. They do have to be an expert in how to lead a process such that all the variables and views of any complex problem get organized and channeled to create a sense of momentum. Then they have to be able to change it all on-the-spot, depending on where the group wants to go. Their eyes must be on the end goal - an Action plan to which everyone is committed.

**2. They remain detached from the outcome.** This is what separates a good facilitator from a consultant in disguise. Consultants *want* to have the answer. Many clients *also* want the consultant to have the answer. I was a so-called "expert" myself for many years. I actually quit consulting because I felt frustrated that clients wouldn't do what I advised. Letting go of the need for 'control' and for having 'the answer' is the foundation of a good facilitator.

**3. They must listen well & challenge thoughtfully.** In the end, good facilitators accept that whatever the group decides, is what's best. It is better for people to *act* and let whatever flaws there may be, get addressed at a future time. The facilitator's job is to bring out the best that your real employees people have to offer, at this present time. They know that people will grow to a new level of performance if they are allowed to act based on what they are capable of achieving today.

4. What are common situations for using a facilitator?

1. When the boss doesn't want to lead the meeting itself, because that would hinder open dialogue.
2. When the internal 'leader or expert' is *perceived* to have an agenda or a bias (even if it's not true).
3. When an outsider or third party is needed to encourage thinking that is 'outside the box'.

Applications that I've seen include corporate strategy, marketing strategy, new products & innovation development, process re-engineering of all types, and organizational change, particularly around goals, values and vision.

5. What are the main limitations of facilitating? One complaint I've often run into is that it is hard to find the time to get everyone together for a half-day session, let alone one or two full days. It is true that using facilitating to solve problems is a decision to go slower today, in order to go faster tomorrow. A second limitation occurs when no one in the room possesses the key facts or expertise with which to solve the problem. These informational needs must be identified and gathered upfront if the facilitated session is to be successful.

**If you want solutions that your people will *commit* to implementing,** consider hiring a facilitator. Like skating was for my son, you may find it feels a bit awkward at first. Once you try it, you will end up saying, WOW!

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