A good start for this article would be to define the term "facilitator." Facilitator, as the term appears here, refers to someone who is responsible for making people aware of how they are working together (what's going on among and between them).

Often the facilitator is someone with exclusive responsibility for observing and keeping the group aware of their interpersonal process. However, in many cases, team leaders have "facilitator" responsibilities in addition to their responsibility for leading a meeting and guiding the team in the problem solving process.

With the term "facilitator" defined, there's one other important point to address—the importance of facilitator skills in a total quality environment. Our experience has shown that facilitator skills are needed not only by team facilitators and leaders, but also by managers. Managers in a quality environment must demonstrate the same strong interpersonal skills required of facilitators to enable people to truly contribute.

Special skills are required to fulfill the facilitator role. Over the past decade, we have facilitated and observed people facilitating in diverse settings. And, although the organizations and the approaches to quality improvement differ greatly, the traits demonstrated by effective facilitators are consistent. The best facilitators demonstrate these seven characteristics: respect, self-disclosure, self-confidence, questioning versus telling, observant, direct, and confronting rather than confrontational. (Please see the seven characteristics figure on the next page.)

Natural, learned or remembered skills—Some would say these seven traits are inherent characteristics—either you have them or you don't. Based on our experience, we believe they are natural characteristics. But, more often than not, these tendencies are trained out of people.

Our natural abilities in these seven areas are diminished due to our education, work and life experiences that promote caution, closed communication, talking versus listening, telling versus asking, proving versus helping, and avoidance versus positive confrontation.

This skill loss is a good news and a bad news story. The bad news is that little is done to promote and value facilitator skills in our educational system and work environment.

The good news is that if the characteristics are natural or inherent in most people, then something can be done to draw them out, refine and develop them. A workshop for facilitator skill building

We've spent the past seven years designing and testing a workshop to do just that. And, although the process can still be improved upon, we've had considerable success with the learning model shown in active facilitation workshop figure. The workshop focuses on the development and refinement of the seven characteristics. The first step is attention to awareness.

Self and other awareness—People who demonstrate self-confidence hold an accurate picture of who they are. They see their unique strengths and deploy those strengths to complement others and fill in where gaps exist. Rather than being immobilized by their limitations, they consciously strive to reduce them and draw on the strengths of others to augment their weakness.

To achieve self and other awareness, workshop participants should utilize a self-assessment tool to pinpoint their unique facilitation style, its strengths and limitations. Not only will this help to build confidence through a validation of their own capacities, they can also use the assessment to broaden their understanding of different styles.
Are Good Facilitators Born or Can They be Developed?

The seven characteristics of an effective facilitator

1. **Respect.** The sincere belief that each member of the group possesses the skills and capacities to contribute and that the team can set its own direction and make sound decisions. Underlying this respect is the belief that knowledge gained from life and work experience is as valuable to the improvement process as is organizational status and education.

2. **Self-disclosure.** The willingness to articulate thoughts and feelings about oneself, others, and what is happening, as well as the ability to differentiate between thoughts and feelings. Effective facilitators share how they feel with one primary intention—to help the group progress.

3. **Self-confidence coupled with self-disclosure.** This enables the facilitator to take the risks necessary to model openness. Self-confidence is the quality of being in touch with who you are and feeling good about it.

4. **Questioning versus telling.** The effective facilitator makes no assumptions about why group members do or don't do things. Instead, he/she asks. So instead of saying to a team, "you are avoiding conflict," he/she asks a question: "this is the third time, you switched the subject when the project funding was mentioned, what might be causing the topic jumps?"

5. **Observant.** This characteristic is demonstrated when a facilitator is able to:
   - Watch and interpret non-verbal communication
   - Note (in writing) what was said, by whom and when, especially when discussions are spirited and/or emotional
   - Stay attuned to proxemics. (where people sit in relationship to others and how they physically posture themselves)

6. **Direct.** Which means repeating what was seen or heard without dressing it up or watering it down. Example: "Pat you arrived 30 minutes after the meeting started" versus "some of us are getting here late."

7. **Confronting versus confrontational.** Confronting is done immediately, rather than saving it for later, and with non-judgmental language rather than evaluative language, like "you should have," "why didn't you," "I would have," et cetera. It is the ability to bring people face to face with reality. This is demonstrated when there is a discrepancy between:
   - What a team member is saying and what he/she is doing.
   - What a member is saying and what he/she said earlier.
   - What the team agrees to (like ground rules) and their conformance to their own "rules."
   - The process the group has agreed to follow and what they are actually doing.

In a role clarification module facilitators should learn how to reach agreement with teams and team leaders relative to things like:

- **What is expected of the team leader?**
- **What is expected of the team members?**
- **What issues will be held in confidence?**
- **How and when will other members of the organization be drawn into team activities?**
- **Who does what?**

Mutual respect grows as a result of a contracting process and is tested and validated when team members rely on the contract or agreement to guide them in their decisions relative to roles and responsibilities.

A common outcome of role clarification is that the team requests the facilitator to act as their guide to understanding group dynamics and interpersonal relations. This is clearly one of the facilitator’s most important roles and it can be further clarified through the development of ground rules.

**Ground rules**—We define ground rules as the behavioral norms agreed upon by the entire team. Ground rules are different than operating practices; which are the technical and logistical norms like: the responsibility for scribing; or how often, when, and where the team meets.

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Some examples of ground rules are: We make statements and invite comment
• Each member contributes equally. We state the reasons behind the positions we take.
• No cheap shots. All information is shared.
• We respect and value different opinions.

**Directness and confronting versus being confrontational.** When a team has agreed upon ground rules, it promotes the use of two essential facilitator skills: being direct, and confronting rather than being confrontational.

**Being direct.** A facilitator can be very direct in addressing a team member's specific non-conformance or conformance to a ground rule. Let's look at an example.

If a team member takes cheap shots at another and one of the ground rules is "no cheap shots" a facilitator can say something like this "Sarah, your comment to Pat that 'we're not all like you. Some of us really care about this project,' sounded like a cheap shot to me. What were you trying to tell Pat?" Notice there is no dressing it up with "Sarah, that's not like you. You're usually so sensitive. I'm sure you didn't mean to hurt Pat's feelings." And there's no dressing it down with "Nice going Sarah, another rude comment!"

**Confronting but not being confrontational.** The ground rules provide the facilitator with a framework for intervening. They give the facilitator a valid reason for interrupting the group's discussion. Further, the facilitator can model the ground rules when making interventions. This modeling is discussed below.

**Observant and questioning versus telling.** When a facilitator is observant and questioning versus telling he/she is able to make appropriate interventions. Learning how to make interventions that facilitate team progress requires that the facilitator learn two things: when to intervene and conversely when not to.

**When to intervene.** Skilled facilitators know how to determine whether an intervention is appropriate based on the consequences to the team's progress if they don't intervene.

**How to phrase the intervention.** Acceptance of what is being said by the facilitator is greater when he/she can model the ground rules when intervening. An example of how ground rules can be modeled when making interventions is to follow a two or three step process for phrasing interventions.

1. **Make a specific statement that identifies what is happening.** "I notice that Joe is doodling, Kara is gazing out the window and Dean and Fran are engaged in a side conversation."
2. **Invite comment."What do you think is contributing to this behavior?"** (By making the statement and inviting comment, the facilitator models how to use ground rule #1 from the ground rule examples.)
3. **Recommend behavior that is consistent with ground rules.** "We have a ground rule that every member contributes equally. What do you feel about what is being discussed Joe? Karen? Dean? Fran?" (This models ground rule #2).

**Intervening based on ground rules also develops the facilitator's observant characteristics.** When the behavioral norms are clearly spelled out, the facilitator knows what to watch for. He or she is able to note specific words and actions that impede progress as well as actions that further progress.

Self-aware and self-confident facilitators, who are clear on their roles and have ground rules to guide them are better able to let go of their personal needs relative to what the team is doing and focus their attention on what's happening among and between team members.

This focusing of attention accomplishes two major objectives for the team. First, they function more efficiently and productively. There is little time or energy wasted trying to gather information or figure out hidden agendas. Second, the facilitator can assess the team's readiness to become self-facilitating.

The most successful facilitators are those who work themselves out of a job. They accomplish this by learning how to determine when a team is ready to become self-regulating. Just one clue of this "readiness" is when there's non-conformance to a ground rule and the team looks at the facilitator, waiting for him/her to intervene.

**Empowerment—Empowerment** occurs when the facilitator is able to transfer his/her skills to the team so they can facilitate themselves. It happens when the facilitator questions the team about impediments to progress and asks the team what they can do about them (versus telling them what to do). It is this ability to observe and question (versus guide and direct) that is the ultimate demonstration of confidence in self and others and respect.

**Teamwork used to be considered "nice if you can get it."** In today's work environment it is necessary to survive and absolutely essential to achieve the competitive advantage. Helping team members develop the seven characteristics of effective facilitation has a direct impact on efficiency and productivity, the quality of decisions, the quality of communications, the quality of worklife, and the quality of work.
Applying effective facilitator characteristics to meeting management.

Have you calculated how much time you spend in meetings? Most managers report that it's up to 70 percent of their time. This is not necessarily bad. In fact, it's a positive sign, it your company is aiming for productivity gains through teamwork. What's scary, though, is the perception that meetings are a waste of time.

Effective meetings can be used to build stronger more productive work teams. Try these ideas to improve the quality of your meetings:

1. **Publish an agenda.** The key word here is publish. Calling of attending a meeting where all attendees are not clear on the purpose is akin to starting a trip for which you have no specific destination. You can publish either a written notification of post an agenda which is written on a chalk board or easel in the meeting room. The advantage of prior written notification is that people have time to prepare in advance.

2. **Use the agenda.** Lots of managers have adopted the advice of publishing meeting agendas. They just don't use the agenda to guide the meeting. Use your agenda to:
   - State the meeting's staff and stop time.
   - Identify the goal of the meeting.
   - List the specific topics to be discussed, by whom and for how long.

3. **Clarify Roles and Responsibilities.** The first agenda item should be roles and responsibilities. Who will be the scribe, watch the time, keep the team focused, et cetera. (For intact teams, a written agreement between the leader and team members regarding who is responsible for what, [and how you'll work with each other is invaluable.]

4. **Develop a code of ethics or ground rules relative to the kind of behavior desired.** Some examples are:
   - All people participate equally.
   - We reach agreement by consensus (or majority vote or 75 percent agreement). ~ Each of us is responsible for gatekeeping; opening the gate for quiet members and closing it on those who tend to take too much air time.
   - No side discussions.
   - It is okay to disagree.
   - Individual positions must be supported by at least two reasons why.
   - No decisions are made until each person states his/her point of view.
   - We respect each other ~ no low blows.
   - Each participant is responsible for calling non-conformance to the code of ethics.

5. **Team Assessments.** The final agenda item should be a brief assessment of how the meeting went. Three questions can be asked to analyze the effectiveness of the meeting:
   - "What did we do that helped accomplish the goals of the meeting?"
   - "What did we do that hindered goal accomplishment?"
   - "What do we need to do differently next time?"

As with any new process, the approach recommended here has its advantages and disadvantages

**On the downside**—It takes more time up front to get the process started. Some managers may feel threatened by it—especially those who believe that surprises keep people on their toes or those who rely on formal authority to make things happen.

It can create an expectation that the code of ethics will be applied outside the meetings as well. (So, people could expect more egalitarian manager/subordinate relationships.)

**On the upside**—The agenda provides a mechanism for an immediate self-audit of progress—we either covered it or we didn't.

It promotes shared leadership.

The code of ethics gives attendees permission to voice different or unpopular points of view (often necessary to reach an informed decision).

The quality of the relationships, the meetings and the product can be improved.

Our experience has been that the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. It's time to rethink the conduct of meetings. We've got to stop meeting the old way if we want to meet the productivity challenge.