

# A GUIDE TO FACILITATION

Understand the why, what  
and when of making  
teamwork work.



# What is Facilitation?

Have you ever wondered why humans have whites in their eyes?

The answer is quite simple: the whites in our eyes create a strong contrast to our coloured iris. As a result, others can easily track where we are looking and often even what we are thinking.

Poker players don't like this and carefully hide their gaze with sunglasses. But many animals don't need to do this. They just naturally hide their gaze, because they don't have whites in their eyes.

This tells us something important: There was a point in time, where humans started to collaborate more with each other than they competed.

But the further we go from our roots, the more we see that collaboration became increasingly difficult.

Today, we are collaborating at massive scales (think big corporates), with people we don't really know and a lot of that is not even face to face anymore. In an environment like this, collaborating effectively is a challenge.

This leads us to facilitation, which is an emerging craft that has been slowly growing in relevance over the last 50 years. But what actually is facilitation?

As the facilitator, your job is to make it easier (Latin: facilis) for a group to achieve something. This can be to achieve consensus, to brainstorm solutions or to quickly ship a project.

The process of easing the way for a group towards a specific achievement is the actual process of facilitation. And it can best be understood as a bundle of skills.

Here are some examples of facilitation skills:

- Establishing a collaborative and psychologically safe environment
- Clearly communicating information and guidelines
- Managing time and expectations
- Active listening and surfacing the right questions
- Creating focus and leading decision-making processes

# A Skill for the Future of Work

One thing is certain: you will face uncertainty.

As the world is becoming more complex, we need to work together to find solutions. It's no longer possible to come to solutions alone.

Complex work has led to specialization which has led to cross-functional and multi-disciplinary teams. The internet has made knowledge work also more diverse, leading to mixed cultures and perspectives within teams. While having a wide-range of views can be helpful to solve complex problems, they can also cause new problems that we face for the first time.

To make use of diverse perspectives and work together effectively, we need leaders who foster meaningful dialogues. Not being able to meet face-to-face adds another dimension that can disrupt communication. Facilitation is therefore a necessary skill for the information age.

Facilitators make it easier for groups to achieve something. That's the literal translation of facilitation. More practically, a facilitator makes it easier for groups to make sense of information, brainstorm solutions, reach consensus, and make decisions.

Everyone can develop facilitation skills, even if they're not subject matter experts. The goal of Facilitator School is to help you cultivate the necessary skills to guide teams and enable change.

Here are three reasons why every organization should pay attention to facilitation:

## **1. Diversity is an advantage and a challenge**

As the workplace is becoming more distributed, it is becoming more diverse. Diversity is a major advantage that remote-first companies have and many have become to see it as their most important asset. Why? Because having a team of mixed backgrounds increases the chance of finding new approaches and creative solutions.

It's clear by now that diverse teams are more likely to innovate.

But diversity is not without obstacles. Whenever different cultures meet, clashes become inevitable. Without a safe and supportive environment, it's impossible to leverage the potential of diversity.

This is where the facilitator comes in, who is a master of the balancing act.

Facilitators tap into the potential of diversity by finding the most inclusive and effective ways to collaborate as a group. By providing space for everyone's voice and synthesizing perspectives, the facilitator helps to minimize conflicts and helps the team safely navigate change.

## **2. Collaboration is increasingly complex**

What makes humans powerful is our ability to work together. By collaborating and sharing knowledge, we're able to benefit from discoveries made around us.

Large companies like Apple and Google know the power of combining minds, which is why they've created huge campuses where workers don't just work but also eat, learn and exercise together.

By spending more time in different contexts together, there's more chance for insights and collaboration.

But spending more time together to work on complex problems can be costly. Without a balance, organizations end up in collaboration overload: a state in which everyone is jumping from meeting to meeting without taking the time for deep work or thinking over important decisions.

Facilitators have the skill set to deal with collaboration overload. Instead of running open-ended meetings, the facilitator runs focused workshops in which all energy of the team is on the most important challenges.

Facilitated gatherings save the team time while producing better results.

### **3. We need new mindsets**

As the world is becoming more complex, many business problems surface for the first time. That means that you can't solve today's challenges with yesterday's solutions. Unfortunately, as pressure builds, we're more likely to resort to what we know best; best practices for the past.

What we need in a complex world is a mindset of experimentation.

It's difficult to make predictions, so we need to test different options to land on what works best. Startups are a good example of this principle; they test many ideas, discard the ones that don't, and double down on those that do. Large corporations with their slow decision-making structures cannot keep up, giving startups massive rewards for experimentation.

Regardless of the larger context, facilitators can help cultivate a mindset of experimentation—even if it's only within teams.

Good facilitators help groups become aware of thinking patterns, expose them to new ways of thinking, and implement new mindsets. Facilitators do their magic by using exercises that help people through a learning process that trigger little "aha"-moments. Once people go through an experience, it becomes easier for them to update their beliefs and views.

# The Value of Being a Facilitator

In hunter-gatherer groups, people work together to transform. Through rituals and specific processes, they bring about deep change in themselves and others—strengthening the community bonds. They don't need silent retreats; the root of transformation is in the energy from the community.

Most of us live and work in concrete jungles, where there's little room for rituals and community spirit. Social bonds are dissolving as distributed work is on the rise. Data-driven decision-making is taking away humanity from decisions. How can we turn the tide?

Facilitators fill the need that tribe elders played in the past—guiding open communication and making transformation possible through the group's energy.

Facilitators help themselves and others through transformations. Using rituals and specific processes, communication between group members improves and decisions can be made with more complete and better information.

But why should you as an individual want to become a facilitator? As a knowledge worker, you probably already have a lot on your plate. The thing is, knowing how to facilitate collaboration between team members is a valuable skill that allows you to distinguish yourself in your company.

Here are three reasons to strive to become a master facilitator.

# **1. Accelerate your career**

Our calendars are filled with meetings. Regardless if you work in an office or remote, you probably spend lots of time discussing challenges in groups. But how often do you have the feeling you contribute something to the conversation, or that the conversation itself contributes to solving the challenge at hand?

Meetings are not going away, but we should think about ways to better invest our attention. Small improvements in the effectiveness of meetings add up rapidly. Less time spent arguing means more time for meaningful conversations, lowering the stress levels of everyone present. Facilitators are the ones making this possible, becoming indispensable for their company.

When you become a proficient facilitator, you can make almost any meeting more valuable. But facilitation doesn't just go outward; as a facilitator, you will change the most. How you think dictates how you behave. Being able to spot a limiting mindset in others will make it easier to spot it in yourself, creating opportunities for growth.

# **2. Find more meaning in your work**

We humans are social beings. Yes, we all need moments of deep solo work to come to insights and find solutions to our work problems, but we feel best and do our best work with others.

When we solve complex problems together as a team, we feel connected. And as the facilitator, you are the centre of this feeling. Other people will be grateful for your work. And what else can be more meaningful?

As change in the world accelerates, we face more complex problems. As it's getting more difficult to find solutions on our own, we need to collaborate with others to deliver solutions.

Helping groups get aligned to solve meaningful challenges gives thousands of facilitators around the world a sense of meaning. While they're not providing answers themselves, facilitators know how to bring about the (group) transformation needed for change.

In a time where polarization runs rampant, facilitators have the chance to smoothen communication and bring people closer together. Only if we're becoming more conscious about how we communicate and interpret others, will we be able to turn the tide and bring about the change our world needs.

### **3. Make a positive impact on others**

As face-to-face communication is replaced by text, voice, and video chat, it's easier to misinterpret each other. We start to miss out on the nuances that we would have picked up otherwise. Clear communication is more important than ever.

Facilitators help everyone reflect on their own mindsets and ways of communication, in order to help people grow compassion. When we're open to others, share our thoughts and feelings, and don't withhold information, we can make a difference through collaboration.

But, this is easier said than done, as we're creatures of habit and unconsciously fall back to old patterns. That's why facilitators can make an impact by pointing out the unspoken tensions.

People often feel like imposters because they feel like they should know more than they do. But once they engage in a facilitated conversation, they'll notice that nobody has complete information. When we realize others are much like us—that we have more in common than that we're different—we can make a difference in the world. When you are a facilitator, you can be the person to make us realize that.

Become a facilitator and make a positive difference in yourself, your company, and the world.

# Learning Facilitation

What is the hardest thing about learning to ride a bike?

\*drumroll\*

The asphalt.

I'm sorry for this dad joke. Let me give you the real answer:

The hardest thing is that in order to know how to ride a bike, you need to make the experience of riding a bike. Something clicks once you feel the motion of the bike in combination with your body movement.

Studying kinetic friction, gravity or the components of a bike won't get you there. It's the experience that really counts. The same is true for facilitation: In order to know how to facilitate, you need to make the experience of facilitating.

But isn't this a paradox? How can you facilitate, before knowing how to facilitate?

Similar to your first bike ride, you need to make an active decision. You need to let go of the natural flow of a meeting or workshop and take charge in the role of a facilitator. Even if you don't feel ready for it, yet.

Doing this takes courage and there is no guarantee that it goes well. (Remember the asphalt joke)

But once you experience a good running meeting or workshop, you know what it feels like.

That feeling will not only boost you with confidence but will be your anchor point for your next collaboration session.

But you don't need to jump in at the deep end with facilitation.

Here are the steps that we would recommend when you want to learn facilitation. Very much inspired, by how to make the first bike run easier:

### **1. Understand the physics**

- The physics of facilitation are what is called group dynamics. Reading on group dynamics will give you an understanding of when groups fail and what makes them different from each other.

### **2. Learn the basics**

- The basics of facilitation are to know your tools and techniques. You can use those to make it easier for the group to achieve a specific goal. Learning the basics always pays off and will give you a sense of security.

### **3. Take test turns**

- Practice, before you go on the stage. Ask your friend or family to be the participant and try to take it seriously. My old lacrosse coach always told me "You play how you train". And there is some truth in that.

### **4. Make the leap**

- At some point, you need to make the leap. Prepare a small workshop or meeting and keep it simple. But don't half-heart it. Try to apply as much as you learned and will quickly see what works for you and what your own facilitation style is.

# Facilitator Masterclass

At the Facilitator School, we believe everyone can become a great Facilitator given the right skills and tools. That's why we create the Facilitator Masterclass.

It's a four-week cohort-based training, where we teach manager and professionals everything we know about the topic.

Does this sound interesting to you?

[\*\*Learn more about the Facilitator Masterclass\*\*](#)



# FACILITATOR SCHOOL