

# Want to Become a Better Leader? Take a Facilitation Class

by Katherine Rosback

Here's an exercise workshop participants complete. Follow along, you leaders who have never chosen to take a facilitation class.

Grab a sheet of paper. Any kind will do, even your iPad if you can write with your iPen. But participants complete this exercise in handwriting. No typing.

Draw a vertical line down the center of your paper to create two equal columns. Label the left column "Facilitator," and the right column "Leader."

Focusing only on the left column, list your responses to the question, "What are the key responsibilities of a facilitator in a meeting?" List as many as you can think of.



Now repeat the writing exercise for the right column but answer the question, "What are the key responsibilities of a leader in a meeting?"

I've conducted this exercise for over 25 years at the start of my Advanced Facilitation Workshop. After giving the participants time to write down their thoughts, I move around the room clockwise, asking participants to read what they have written—first for the facilitator and then for the leader. As they do so, I capture their responses on a whiteboard.

**While capturing the responses, I often hear comments such as, "Oh, wow, my thought is way off."**

At that point, I reply, "That's okay. Read it anyway."

Another might note, "That's what I had written down for a leader, not a facilitator!" To that, I say something like, "No issue. Hold onto that thought and when we're done capturing this side, I'll add yours to the leader column."

When I have captured all the responses, I ask, “Which items appear in both columns?” and then, “What percentage of items appear in both columns?”

In my workshops, the percentages of qualities that show up in both columns run around 60–80 percent. Many participants even say that they saw no difference between the two roles, save for who ultimately owned the decision.

And thus, my puzzle:

## **Why don't more leaders sign up for facilitation workshops to further develop their leadership skills?**

The majority of an organization's work takes place in meetings. Why the choice to not become proficient in the skills that significantly improve the outcome of those meetings?

I lay blame on the late 1980s to early 1990s' obsession with facilitators trained in Six Sigma, information management, project management, or team building. As one colleague noted, many companies “trained a cadre of non-leaders in facilitation skills, with these people being given the task of facilitating important meetings, with their role being described as a supporting role for the leader that owns the issue(s) being worked. That results in leaders who consider learning facilitation skills beneath them.”

Most participants see not only the commonality but also frequently note in their end-of-class feedback, “My manager needs to take this” or “Every leader needs to take this.”

One colleague insightfully asked, “Can you really even lead if you can't effectively facilitate?” Another leader noted, “[The workshop] developed questioning and communication skills that opened deeper conversations, stronger partnerships, and shared commitment to action. The training made me realize that we spend most of our lives communicating—except nobody teaches us how.”

**“Can you really even lead if you can't effectively facilitate?”**



My workshop participants aren't the only ones who have noticed this. A 2019 Harvard Business Review article noted, "Fifty percent of senior leaders believe that their talent development efforts don't adequately build critical skills. Traditional providers bring deep expertise in teaching cognitive skills, but they are far less experienced in teaching people how to communicate and work with one another effectively."

A *Forbes* article titled "Facilitation Skills Just Might Be the Best Kept Leadership Secret" noted "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."

Skills such as structuring and executing effective decision-making conversations, asking better questions that help a team more deeply understand opportunities and challenges, and reading and redirecting the group dynamics that interfere with building engagement and alignment lie not only in the realm of facilitation but also are critical for every leader.

## These skills are essential tools for getting work done.

In 2024, after spending almost 30 years trying to overcome the term facilitation, I rebranded my workshop as a leadership workshop. A comment from this class: "This is the best leadership workshop I have ever taken."

P.S.

*Want to get a glimpse into the world of process skills? Read the attached Appendix to gain insight into why I used the techniques I did, and the science behind those techniques.*

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## APPENDIX

Do you think that facilitation skills are only about capturing meeting minutes, using Post-Its, and producing an agenda? In the previous exercise, I conclude by noting that while a leader might have the focus on content—what needs to be achieved—facilitation skills bring the knowledge of process—how you want to get there. And those skills are based on rich understanding of the science and neuroscience behind how people think and behave in groups.

I chose the facilitator-leader question to begin the workshop not only to draw out people's perceptions of the differing skills (rather than telling them), but also because the question mirrors those that frequently come up in meeting, questions such as:

- What are your thoughts about Proposal A? Proposal B?
- What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of this candidate?
- Why will this initiative succeed? What could make it fail?

These are like the facilitator-leader exercise.

So if you were faced with needing to explore the potential of a candidate, what process would you use to do that? Think for a moment about that. What would you do first? What's the first question you would ask?

### What NOT to Do

1. I *wouldn't* advise asking, "What do you think are the critical strengths and weaknesses?"
  - a. You are asking people to think in two different directions. People (brains) don't do that well simultaneously. They will tend to think only in one way.
  - b. You are inviting people to stick with predetermined thoughts. If I don't like an idea, you are 100 percent certain to hear about the weaknesses from me, and not so much about the potential strengths.
  - c. You are asking people to diverge and converge at the same time. That results in a very limited list. Converging and diverging activate different parts of the brain, and the human brain prefers to converge.
2. I also would not advise just tossing your question out to the group (especially if you are on a virtual call). Why?
  - a. You can bet that the most dominant or prominent expert voice in the room will speak first.
  - b. Depending on that person's rank (SME, longer time of tenure, etc.), answers from others will likely fall prey to a motivational or anchoring bias.

- c. You will hear from only 70 percent of your direct reports. The rest will stay silent, and you will mistakenly assume that the silent ones have nothing to add.
- d. If you are on a virtual call, people are far less likely to speak up. That leads you to mistakenly conclude that no one has any thoughts.

## Why I Did What I Did

1. Why did I ask participants to focus on one column at a time, not both? ***A singular focus directs thinking more effectively than multiple foci.***
2. Why did I ask them to write their responses before sharing them? ***To mitigate the effects of anchoring and some motivational biases.*** Mitigating the anchoring bias is extremely important when asking your team for risk assessments of cost estimates or the likelihood of success.
3. Why handwriting as opposed to typing?
  - a. ***Writing improves not only recall of information*** (you must summarize while writing) but also improves commitment to what you wrote (something important to note for leaders seeking to improve commitment to action). There's some wonderful brain science on this topic.
  - b. Anytime you hear something like, "Mine must have been wrong. I was thinking differently," you can see why writing things down before hearing from others is so critical. ***By writing things down, you are using the lever of cognitive dissonance to ensure that you don't lose the idea that no one else had.*** Remember, if an idea is unique/innovative/disruptive, it begins as a minority idea.
4. I used the "Order of Go" to collect ideas. This ***ensures that I hear from everyone and not just the more dominant, extroverted voices*** in the room. (It's an often-repeated statistic that two or three people do 60 percent of the talking, and my experience confirms that simply posting a ground rule that all voices should be heard doesn't change that.)
5. ***Diverge before converging.*** By asking the person who noted another person's facilitator responsibility on his leader's list to pause, I proactively redirected a discussion that otherwise might convergently dissolve into "who's right." This kind of discussion (debate?) stymies the capturing of other ideas. I've seen this happen in multiple decision sessions where the group gets bogged down debating an inconsequential uncertainty (that's the value of the tornado diagram for you decision folks).
6. ***Converge.*** When I finally ask, "What identical responsibilities are on both lists?" I move into the convergent phase. This would equate to such questions as, "What do both projects have in common?" or "What are the critical weaknesses we need to address?" The brain loves to converge. As a leader, are you frustrated by a lack of innovation or new strategic directions? Knowing the fundamental difference between these two kinds of thinking and the ability to redirect when the converging-loving brain leaps into assessment is a critical skill for any leader, particularly for those who want to promote innovation.