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University Technology Services  
The Ohio State University  
Improving Team Performance with Facilitation  

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This paper’s Key Concepts are:  
1. Increased use of working teams  
2. Absence of team skill sets in computing professionals  
3. Facilitation skills providing a bridge to high performance  

To become more efficient for the future, we are increasingly using teams to perform information systems work. However, we see teams formed to achieve an objective and find that six months later, they are not much farther along than before they began. Everyone is tired of attending meeting after meeting without results. What is the holdup?  

Come and see what The Ohio State University is doing for their computing professionals to assist them in achieving their team goals. The Office of Human Resources teamed with University Technology Services to create a series of four workshops to teach the meeting, interpersonal, and team skills that are frequently lacking in the staff. We focused on Facilitation techniques and Team Dynamics and the program is very successful. This presentation will discuss the program used this last year with an emphasis on the facilitation portions taught by the presenter.
Introduction and background:
On July 10, 1995, the Academic and the Administrative computing facilities of The Ohio State University merged under one organizational umbrella named University Technology Services (UTS). On February 28, 1996, the staff merged. In this merger, functional Working Groups became the primary organizational division. They are lead by Directors. These Directors and the Associate Directors heading the Faculty, Research, and Business Partners Advisory Groups comprise the Management Team (MT). The middle management level diminished to a Resource Allocation and Administrative Home Project Team Leaders (AHPTL) function. Self-directed Teams known as Project Teams became the primary method of supervision and production.

These Project Teams are cross-functional. That is, depending on the nature of the team objectives, they include individuals from multiple Working Groups. This organizational method has many advantages that include:

- It helps to ensure the right people are present to provide input and to take part in decision making.
- It allows a broader learning environment to be in place with previous organizational barriers becoming transparent. This encourages a great cross-fertilization of knowledge and it allows individuals to move from Working Group to Working Group as their knowledge, interests, and the needs of the organization indicate.
- It acts to retain employees since they can often more easily pursue new opportunities within the organization, lessening the need to go elsewhere for new challenges.
- It provides more back-up skills so that the absence or loss of an employee does not leave as large of a vacancy as when only a few individuals have exposure to what that employee does.

Problem:

The new teams accepted the changes and attempted to support the management directives. They met as often as it seemed they needed to and tried to achieve the results being asked of them. However, since meetings seemed to be the way teams should be interacting and performing, they proliferated. Some of the most knowledgeable staff began to find their attendance was in constant demand leaving little time to do any work other than attend meetings. Increasingly, in order to preserve time for “real” work, people were beginning to pick and choose which meetings to attend. Attendance declined; individuals were late. Teams were not able to have the necessary information providers or key decision makers available when they needed them.

Compounding the problem of the proliferation of meetings was the overall impression that most of the Project Teams were having a very difficult time in achieving anything at all. The meetings were very ineffective. It was hard to stay on track and hard to even know what the track should be. Meeting attendees would take a subject and throw it into an hour of non-related observations. Other times, an attendee could lead the meeting into an hour of trading war stories. Gossip, “What did you do over the weekend?”, political posturing, and speculation filled the meeting times and little more was accomplished. When the Team Leader would attempt to bring the team back to the subject, there seemed to be little interest in contributing. Members increasingly were
losing faith in their ability to achieve anything at all in this new environment. Attendance and participation, particularly on the part of the more knowledgeable of the Project Team members, dramatically dropped.

Besides the proliferation of meetings and the lack of achievement within the meetings, another factor was defeating very well-intentioned employees. Conflict was too difficult to handle within a meeting. The very word itself struck fear into the data processing employees. Most people avoid conflict when they can. Few say “Wonderful! We have conflict so we can finally achieve meaningful results.” Our team members simply did not have the skill sets to manage conflict within their teams. There also was little guidance from the Management Team.

Attendance continued to decline. Frustration was rising.

The Solution and its Process

The UTS Human Resource Working Group began working with the OSU Office of HR Development to explore solutions. Included in this cross-functional Project Team, is the primary facilitator from the Application, Development, and Support Working Group (AD&S). The name of the team is the UTS/OHRD Team Training Project Team and is called the Training Team in this paper.

The Training Team analyzed (based on their observations) the primary sources of most of the problems the teams were having. They then put together a plan to create and present a series of four workshops to help address those problems.

The workshops are:

- Conducting and Attending Effective Meetings
- Facilitating for Success: Techniques and Tools
- Improving Team Effectiveness: A High Performance Model
- Team-based Problem Solving

The first two workshops focus on basic facilitation techniques. Though based on workshops currently in use by OSU HR, we heavily revised them so they apply directly to the UTS organization. This paper focuses on these first two. The third one was newly developed. The fourth one is almost intact from the original OSU HR version.

We conduct all workshops in the OSU HR facilities to get staff away from their normal interruptions. They are four hours in length (instead of an entire day) to promote attendance. Attendance is always optional. However, most of the directors attend in order to set an example and have said they have received many ideas they are now putting into practice.

The target audience was initially the Project Team leaders. However, after we conducted the first workshop, it became apparent that the principles applied to everyone in the organization. It also was clear that attendees should be empowered to require that any UTS meeting adhere to certain standards - that ALL employees were responsible for the outcome of any meeting they attended, not just the Project Team Leader. This concept alone has had very positive results and both the Project Team Leaders and the attendees have expressed gratitude that this attitude is held and supported by the department.
Workshop: Conducting and Attending Effective Meetings

This workshop was conducted first. The staff perception was that meetings had become unmanageable and were a major source of frustration among the staff. The Training Team thought that if they could create something immediately useful and effective for the staff, that the staff would be more likely to attend the remainder of the workshops. This concept appears to be valid. In fact, many of the participants requested topics that are covered in the remaining three sessions and many ask when the next workshops will be held so they can sign up.

We realized that most of the Project Team Leaders, and certainly the majority of the participants, did not know how a meeting should be structured or how it functioned in relationship to empowered, participative working Project Teams. Most of their experience with meetings had been in a hierarchical environment in which the manager communicated the tasks to be done and the employee went forth to execute them. With the changes we had set in place, we left everyone foundering with a new environment and old, outdated skill sets. The challenge was to quickly develop the new skill sets needed to achieve function in the workplace.

This workshop has given employees a sense that they are regaining control over their meeting processes, that they do have a say in how the meetings are run, that they, alone, can actually make a difference. Those who have attended are recommending to others that they also attend. It is being conducted every quarter and attendance increases in each presentation.

The workshop topics include:
- Establishing clear meeting objectives
- Selecting and inviting appropriate meeting participants
- Developing clear agendas
- Clarifying participant roles in meetings
- Establishing meeting ground rules
- Recording meeting minutes, decisions, and next steps
- Defining criteria for success and assessing meeting effectiveness
- Dealing with conflict

Establishing clear meeting objectives:
We realized that many Team Leaders were holding meetings in the hope that they would accomplish “something”. But without a clear definition of what that particular meeting needed to accomplish in order to move the team closer to the Project Team’s objectives, forward movement did not happen.

We emphasized how expensive meetings are to conduct in terms of the salaries sitting around the table. We taught them to question whether this meeting should even take place by asking:
- Can I state in a sentence or less, the meeting’s purpose?
- Do I know what things I expect the meeting to accomplish?
- Do I know who must be present to ensure that we accomplish these things?
- Could I accomplish the same things with a memo or a phone call?

Selecting and inviting appropriate meeting participants:
Too often, a meeting is held without the necessary decision makers present. Also, when objectives are not clearly understood, a shotgun approach is too often used: “Invite everyone important and maybe someone will figure things out.” We teach them to be clear about the objectives and to select participants based on those objectives.
Developing clear agendas:
Most meetings did not have a written agenda. Using an agenda is the single most effective technique to keep a meeting focused on the objectives. It requires the Team Leader to:

- think about the objectives
- think through the process needed to achieve the meeting objectives
- plan which people have to be present to achieve those objectives

An agenda allows the Team Leader to use it as a control mechanism for bringing the meeting back on track. It helps attendees to stay focused. We talk about different formats to use, depending on the need, and how to customize the sample agendas we provide in the handouts.

Including this training and the subsequent use of agendas has already been one of the single greatest effective changes within the organization. Attendees report back that they are surprised at just how helpful the simple use of an agenda is.

Clarifying participant roles in meetings:
Most meetings had consisted of a Team Leader and attendees with the full responsibility for success falling on the shoulders of the Team Leader. We emphasize that every participant is accountable for the success of every meeting, that a team can rotate through the following roles so that everyone has a chance to share the load.

The roles we suggest are:

- Facilitator
- Timekeeper
- Notetaker
- Scribe
- Process observer

We provide a clear understanding of the roles and use them in the exercise at the end of the workshop.

One of the new services we are now offering in our department is that of Process Observer. Those of us who are knowledgeable in meeting Process attend meetings upon request of the Project Team Leader. We observe the process used and give feedback on how to improve. We are very careful to not comment on the content, only the process. Sometimes an “outsider” can be more objective and this observer role has been helpful to some teams. This role is separate from the Process observer role in the team itself.

Establishing meeting ground rules:
“Ground Rules are your friend.” This is often repeated in response to many of the problems people ask about in the workshops. When a meeting is conducted without ground rules, it can quickly get out of hand. We discuss the need to have the ground rules and their appropriate use. We discuss many different scenarios when a particular ground rule can be successfully applied.

The ground rules we now use are from the AD&S facilitator’s experience. They include:

- Starting and ending on time
- One conversation at a time
- Keep discussion relevant
- No soapboxes
• The facilitator’s upheld hand is a “concluding signal”

Most meeting rooms are now sprouting copies of these ground rules. They are adapted for the specific use of each Project Team. Some teams have been effectively performing for some time. They do not need nearly as many Ground Rules as a newer team still struggling to achieve any of their objectives. We are planning on posting a standard set of ground rules in every meeting room. These will be on a whiteboard. Using a whiteboard allows us to cross out or add as needed, depending on the Team that is meeting.

Recording meeting minutes, decisions, and next steps
One of the essential ingredients of a successful meeting which is the easiest to overlook or bypass is this one. So often, people would leave a meeting not clear as to what was decided or what they needed to do next. This supported the opinion that meetings were a waste of time. We discuss the need for this element and we provide sample formats. We also encourage minutes to be posted on our internal website.

Defining criteria for success and assessing meeting effectiveness:
For some Teams, simply staying on track for one hour is a major success. For others, starting and ending on time is a great accomplishment. For most, having an agenda is an achievement. We encourage each Team to decide what their own success criteria are and to use that criteria as a guide to decide what they need to do in order to increase their own meeting effectiveness through better processes.

Dealing with conflict:
One of the greatest concerns people bring into the workshops is about conflict and how to deal with it. Data processing people in general are VERY uncomfortable with dealing with conflict. We give them a few of the most basic tools. However, we emphasize that Agendas and Ground Rules are the most effective of the tools. We talk about specific ways to use these tools in the majority of conflict situations. Attendees report that this has helped them enormously. We emphasize the basics at this time and promise that managing conflict is dealt with in greater detail in the second workshop.

Workshop: Facilitating for Success: Techniques and Tools

This second workshop in the series is a careful extension of the first. It begins where the first one ends. When Team Members and Team Leaders began using agendas, ground rules, minutes, and evaluations, and found the techniques to be successful, they were eager for more tools and knowledge. Attendees from the preceding workshop signed up quickly for this one. The craft of Facilitation itself is explored in much greater detail and the attendees are ready for it.

This workshop includes:
• Elaborating on the facilitator role
• Facilitating discussion
• Choosing the process for a meeting
• Staying on track in spite of difficult situations

The facilitator role:
We begin by discussing the role of the Facilitator, give a definition, and explore the impact facilitation has been having and can have in their own meeting environments. We conduct a discussion about “Why is Neutrality a goal” and “What is its function in relation to facilitation?”
We help them understand how neutrality will help them and we relate it to their own experiences.

**Facilitating discussion:**
The facilitation discussion includes concepts which are easy to grasp once the staff are made aware of them as factors affecting their meeting performance. Though the concepts are easy, the execution is not. These include some of the most critical skill sets lacking in our staff. This section of the workshop seems to rivet the attention of everyone.

We demonstrate Body Language and its impact on the audience. We remind them of SMART objectives discussed in the first workshop and of their specific use for meeting objectives. We spend considerable time on developing effective questions and specific examples for opening discussions. We talk about how to get answers. We consider methods for helping stuck groups and for closing the discussion. We clarify the concept of consensus and other decision types.

**Choosing the process for a meeting:**
Choosing the process for a meeting is another discussion topic to which staff really hadn't given any previous thought. However, we emphasize that a great deal of confusion in a meeting can be eliminated by clarifying the type of meeting and type of discussion that is to be had. It is critical to engage in only one type of discussion at a time.

Once the types are known then the discussion processes can be selected based on the composite and history of the group. Accompanying the processes are discussion tools for generating and evaluating ideas. This again directly addresses some of the problems most of the Teams have been experiencing: the ability get information and then effectively sort through it. We appraise the relative values in brainstorming, Brainwriting, and Storyboarding. We consider idea evaluation using weighting/ prioritizing, balance sheet, opinion poll, and matrix diagrams.

**Staying on track in spite of difficult situations:**
Once the above methods are addressed, we again turn to what so many staff fear: Difficult Situations. We emphasize that so much of what is experienced as “difficult” will be alleviated by all the techniques we’ve already covered. But of course, this doesn’t quite satisfy the concerns people bring to the workshop.

We begin by stressing that the term “Difficult Situation” should be used instead of “Difficult Person” since that describes the majority of the situations. It is far easier to change a situation or circumstance than it is to change another person’s behavior. It is critical to remove the focus from the person and put it on the situation. Once this approach is presented, some of the tension in the workshop begins to dissipate.

Our next step is to distribute a paper comprised of quotes about the nature of “conflict” in a team environment and/ or workshop as viewed by professional facilitators. All of these quotes are positive. Conflict is seen as an opportunity for progress instead of a roadblock. The attitude in this paper takes everyone by surprise and further defuses the tension. Now we are ready to examine actual techniques for dealing with conflict and difficulties.

We talk about common behavior problems and their interventions. We discuss formal and informal interventions. We walk through an exercise that is effective when a major heated difference is a barrier. Then we delve into issues of group conflict and remind everyone that neutrality, ground rules, and patience are among the primary reactive interventions. We look at proactive strategies and at processing the conflict.
Conclusion and results:

There is no time in this workshop to conduct exercises and this has been a subject of discontent. We are examining the possibility of splitting the workshop into two sessions and adding exercises. The pace is almost too fast to cover all the topics in the four hours allotted to it. We are considering replacing a bit of the content with brief exercises. We also plan to begin emphasizing a few key items to take back to the office and try immediately.

We are noticing many positive results from these two workshops. Since we are using informal feedback and session evaluations rather than formal measurements we cannot report actual percentages. The results we are seeing include:

1. A sense that meetings are constructive rather than a waste of time
   - Meetings are starting and ending on time.
   - They are staying on the point (agenda)
   - There is a sense of accomplishment coming from a meeting
2. Feelings that a single person, “I”, can make a difference
3. Interest in learning and practicing more effective meeting techniques
4. Self-monitoring for violations of the ground rules
5. Increased awareness of the “Team” rather than the individual
6. Fewer overt and covert personal and hidden agendas

We consider this facilitative workshop approach to be a great success. The actual culture of the department is gradually changing toward the ideals and desired state of empowered self-directed Project Teams.
Facilitation Resources

Associations:
International Association of Facilitators
IAF Office Contact: Peggy Bushee
7630 West 145th Street, Suite 202
St.Paul, MN 55124
Tel (612) 891-3541
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E-mail iafoffice@gc.apc.org or pbushee@mr.net
http://hsb.baylor.edu/html/fuller/iaf/

Midwest Facilitators’ Network
c/o Jordan-Webb Information Systems
3700 West Devon - Suite F
Lincolnwood, IL 60659-1135
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Southwest Facilitators Network
Lori Ward
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201 Main Street
Fort Worth, TX 76102
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Chris Sowa, chris_sowa@sdt.com

Boston Facilitator’s Roundtable
Jennifer Ball
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National Life Drive
Montpelier, VT 05604

Kansas City, MO
Judy Forbes
Hallmark Cards
25th & McGee
P.O. Box 419580
Kansas City, MO 64141
(816) 274-5550

Southeast Facilitator’s Forum
Southern Company Services
64 Perimeter Center - East
Atlanta, GA 30346
(404) 668-4730
Recommended Reading:

The Skilled Facilitator, Roger M. Schwarz, 1994

Mining Group Gold, Thomas A. Kayser, 1990
Serif Publishing, 701 South Aviation Blvd., El Segundo, CA 90245

Games That Drive Change, Carolyn Nilson, 1995
McGraw-Hill, Inc. 11 West 19th Street, New York, NY 10011

Managing by Storying Around, David M. Armstrong, 1992
Doubleday, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036

Training:

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WEB Page: http://www.olympus.net/ personal/jrough

Electronic Discussion on Group Facilitation:
misc.business.facilitators/ Grp-Facl@Albany.edu
A communication vehicle for professional issues. It is an active discussion averaging four
to six posts per day. Subscribers participate either through the electronic mailing list
Grp-Facl@Albany.edu or through the Usenet Newsgroup misc.business.facilitators.

WEB:

http://hsb.baylor.edu/html/fuller/iaf/
the International Association of Facilitators

http://www.leadstrat.com/
Leadership Strategies - Michael Wilkinson

http://www.mgrush.com/ website.html
MG Rush Systems Inc. - Gary Rush

http://www.facilitate.com/
facilitate dot com

http://www.scassn.org/
the National Communications Association

http://www.cef-cpsi.org/CPSI.htm
Creative Problem Solving Institute