

## **Third Party Group Facilitation: Not So Neutral For Some?**

Mr Leighton Jay

*School of Management, Curtin University, Perth, Australia*

Email: [Leighton.jay@cbs.curtin.edu.au](mailto:Leighton.jay@cbs.curtin.edu.au)

### **Stream: 9 – Organisational Behaviour**

**Profile:** Leighton Jay has an active interest in an array of people management issues in organisations. He currently lectures in human resource management and human resource development, and is researching the use of group facilitation in organisations.

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### ABSTRACT

*The increasing use of group facilitation in and by organisations is an observable phenomenon. It is widely understood to be a means of assisting groups and teams to be more effective by intervening in the 'processes' associated with how groups and teams do their work, while remaining neutral as to the content of the group's work. This paper reports one of the key findings to emerge from a research project investigating the critical contingency factors that influence the use of group facilitation in organisations. According to this research, the most influential contingency factor influencing the use of group facilitation in organisations is the outcomes-oriented mental models used by organisational managers. As benign as this finding appears to be at first glance, it is of importance for both the theory and practice of group facilitation. The implications of this finding are identified and discussed.*

**Keywords:** Group facilitation; group processes, political behaviour.

Group facilitation is of increasing interest to many managers in today's competitive business environment. It is promoted as a means of increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of work groups and teams, and as a means of increasing employees' engagement with group work tasks and duties. In part, its effectiveness is often associated with the independence, or neutrality, of the facilitators who work with organisational groups and teams. While empirical research into aspects of group facilitation has increased in recent years, the research to date remains largely ad hoc and variable in nature and quality. This paper reports the main finding of an ongoing research project whose primary research question is *What are the critical contingency factors that influence the use of group facilitation in organisations?*

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The vast bulk of the group facilitation literature is practitioner-oriented and practitioner-written. The number of books published on the subject has increased substantially in recent years, mirroring the expanding interest in group facilitation as a profession. Some of these texts, such as Hunter, Bailey & Taylor 1999, Kiser 1998, and Schwarz 2002 have achieved almost canonical status, such is the regard in which they are held by practitioners and those involved in training and developing facilitators. In contrast, scholarly research into aspects of group facilitation is both sparse in quantity and variable in quality (Jay 2004; Thomas 2006). In many ways, these observations reflect the profession itself. The rise of the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) as a certifying, global peak body with affiliate organisations in many countries, has added weight to emerging perceptions of facilitation as a profession. The IAF accredits and grants membership to facilitators who enter the profession through vastly different pathways, from vastly different backgrounds, and with very different facilitation training. It has identified a set of core competencies necessary for professional certification (Baker & Fraser 2005), although the value of these is contended (Ringer 1999; Thomas 2007). The IAF has

produced a statement of professional ethics (Hunter & Thorpe 2005); established a professional journal (*Group Facilitation: A Research & Applications Journal*); promoted national and international facilitator conferences; encouraged technology-driven innovations (Bradley & Beyerlein 2005); and fostered communities of practice through moderated electronic discussion group forums (IAF, 2007). Within this framework, the notion of ‘facilitator neutrality’ has retained a prominent position as a ‘cardinal tenet’ (Wong 2005:175) that underpins facilitation practice.

### **What Is Facilitation?**

The Macquarie Dictionary (Revised Third Edition 2001:668) defines ‘facilitate’ as: ‘to make easier or less difficult’ (it defines facilitation as ‘the act or process of facilitating’). Following this, group facilitation is often described as enabling groups to do their work, or helping to make the group’s work easier for the group to do (eg. Priest, Gass & Gillis 2000). However, Kiser (1998:8) notes that such an understanding can be limiting and can often be misleading. ‘There are times when allowing (or obligating) a group to struggle with an issue is the most effective way to achieve a breakthrough, and this hardly meets the definition of making it easier’. Defining facilitation becomes more difficult when the distinction between ‘content’ and ‘process’ enters the discussion.

Most writers in the field of facilitation, both practitioners and researchers, draw a distinction between ‘content’ and ‘process’ in groups. We attend to the literature’s interest in this issue because this paper reports an unanticipated finding from this research project that has implications for the mainstream point of view. Dick (1991:244) describes the difference between content and process in this way:

*Content is the task which a group is working on. It includes the particular task goals a group pursues, the information relevant to these goals, the decisions made, and the plans or recommendations which emerge from the meeting or activity. Process is the means by which the group addresses the task. It includes the formal and informal structure of the group, the way leadership is exercised, and the way the group’s functioning is managed.*

Using this or a similar description, facilitators generally accept principal responsibility for process, but refrain from contributing to content (Anson, Bostrom & Wynne 1995; Bens 2000; Hogan 2002; Justice & Jamieson 1998; Maier 1967; Schwarz 2002). Process interventions are generally understood to be those that influence:

- how a group structures its approach to completing a task;
- how a group generates, shares and uses information; and
- how group members relate to each other (Hirokawa & Gouran 1989; Ringer 2002).

Intervening in the generation, sharing and use of information is sometimes called content intervention because the focus of the intervention is on the task aspect of the group's work (Dennis & Wixom 2002; Eden 1990; Kwok, Ma & Vogel 2003). However, because these interventions do not involve the facilitator contributing content information to the group (Schuman 1996), it is more accurate to regard them as process interventions. These can include: asking questions (Nelson & McFadzean 1998); ensuring that minority or unpopular views are heard by the group (Phillips & Phillips 1993); leading a group through creative thinking processes (Delbecq, Van de Ven & Gustafson 1975; Hogan 2003); and enabling groups to make decisions about the information available (Kaner et al. 1996).

In making the distinction between process and content, there is no suggestion that task or content outcomes are unimportant. Rather, most writers use the distinction to emphasise the process nature of facilitative interventions (Schein 1999; Sinha 1979). Despite widespread acceptance of this distinction, some writers question whether facilitators are always able to make and hold such a commitment in real-world situations (Aakhus 2001; Shaw 2002). This seems to be an important issue in as much as logic dictates that if facilitators are unable to maintain this distinction and restrict their interventions only to process interventions, it calls their independence and neutrality into question. There is some contention about neutrality in the literature and among practitioners (Hunter & Thorpe 2005), although most writers are of the opinion that neutrality is an essential element of facilitation (eg. Wong 2005). Griffith, Fuller & Northcraft (1998) note that facilitators should be impartial and should only exert influence through neutral enhancement of the processes used by the group.

Kirk & Broussine (2000) take a contrary position when considering organisationally-based facilitation from a political perspective. In doing so, they perceive a need for facilitators to observe, interpret, and reflect upon the political aspects associated with working as facilitators in organisations. They argue that the common perception of facilitators 'as people apart, distanced from the organisation's political networks . . . able to comment and intervene independently and neutrally' is 'fallacious' (Kirk & Broussine 2000:13). They conceive of organisations as political environments in which both the act of facilitation, and the facilitators themselves, become political aspects of organisational life. In addition to such political perspectives, there is a minority of facilitation scholars who suggest that facilitators can legitimately contribute to a group's deliberations by adding content-based information or suggestions – either by choice (Ackermann 1996; Dennis & Wixom 2002; Jones & Bearley 2001; Shaw 2002), or when compelled to do so in certain circumstances (Bostrom, Anson & Clawson 1993; Griffith, Fuller & Northcraft 1998; Kinlaw 1996). This most typically occurs either when a group member is appointed to the role of facilitator, or when the facilitator has some form of content-delivery responsibility in addition to process intervention responsibility. For example, this occurs

when a facilitator has been given responsibility to manage a group's process, but also has responsibility to deliver a training program. Schwarz (2002) discusses these situations at length, suggesting that it is preferable to perceive such people as taking up other roles (eg. trainer) in a 'facilitative' way.

Despite these exceptions, the bulk of the mainstream group facilitation literature largely accepts the distinction between process and content, and consistently argues that facilitation is limited to process interventions. Given such widespread agreement in the literature, facilitation was defined in the following way for the purposes of this study: *Facilitation is the formal process in which a person external to the group in question seeks to enhance group interaction and outcomes while remaining neutral with respect to the content of the group's tasks and goals.* As this study's findings become clearer, it is apparent that some of the implications create sufficient cause to revisit the definitional issues associated with group facilitation in the literature. This paper addresses one such issue.

## METHODOLOGY

The research project that gives rise to this paper proceeded from an interpretive theoretical perspective (Crotty 1998) using a qualitative approach (Punch 1998). Twenty managers and twenty facilitators were interviewed about their respective experiences of using facilitators, or being engaged as facilitators, in organisational settings. Due consideration was given to sampling issues in the design of the research. Participants were recommended by practicing members of the Australasian Facilitators' Network and were selected using the intentional sampling techniques of *maximum variation sampling* and *snowball sampling* (Patton 2002). The managers are representative of the corporate sector (coded as CM), the public sector (PSM), and the not-for-profit sector (NFPM). All of them have appointed facilitators within the previous 12-month period and have a history of appointing facilitators on multiple occasions. Thirteen of the interviewed facilitators work as 'consultant facilitators' who are external to organisations (EFac), while the remainder are internal facilitators (IFac). The latter are organisational employees who take up the role of facilitator within their organisations, either as part of, or in addition to, their specified duties. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and all transcripts were reviewed for accuracy before being analysed.

Given the exploratory nature of the research project, the semi-structured interviews aimed to generate 'thick' descriptions about the use of facilitation in organisations and the organisational contingencies influencing the use of group facilitation in organisations. Interviewees were sent a short questionnaire

about their experiences of group facilitation in organisations prior to the interview. The survey questions were generated on the basis of the literature review and functioned to prepare interviewees for the interview. The face-to-face interviews used the survey questions as an interview guide (Patton 2002), with interviewees given considerable scope to recount their experiences in depth and identify a much broader range of possible contingency factors than those in the questions. Probing questions were used to elicit further details and to expand on their accounts (Punch 1998).

NVivo software was used to improve the efficiency of handling and analysing the raw and processed data (Weitzmann 1999). Iterative steps of data reduction, data display and drawing and verifying conclusions were used in accordance with recommended practice (Miles & Huberman 1994; Punch 1998). The data were analysed using an iterative content analysis approach through which categories of meaning emerged from the data (Broadbent 2002). Open coding was initially used to broadly categorise the data. Following this, inductive coding produced abstract, conceptual understandings grounded in the data. These gave broader meaning to the data and its possible significance (Strauss & Corbin 1994), and enabled second order theoretical codes to be generated and explored. A later stage of data analysis focusing on generating and testing hypotheses in the data was aided by further steps of data reduction and data display (Patton 2002). Throughout data analysis, the researcher used memos to develop and record his sense-making activities and enhance his reflexive practice (Miles & Huberman 1994). Memos written throughout the coding process were also coded to relevant nodes for ease of management and critical review. Inter-coder reliability of coding was achieved through review activities and regular supervision meetings with the researcher's supervisors. These meetings reviewed and discussed the content of memos, coding practices and the data analysis processes being used.

## **RESULTS**

The most critical contingency factor that influences the use of group facilitation in organisations to emerge from this study is the outcomes-oriented mental models used by managers. This principal finding is the focus of this paper. Specifically, the data demonstrate that the managers' mental models and theories-in-use (Argyris 1999) are predicated on an underlying assumption that group facilitation can be used to achieve particular, desired organisational outcomes. These outcomes fall into one of three categories: content outcomes (directly associated with the group's task); humanising work outcomes (in particular, enhancing trust and relationships between group members); and 'increased commitment' outcomes. On occasions, the managers hope to achieve outcomes across more than one of these categories. For example, CM 25 comments that she wanted 'a framework and a process that

will get particular outcomes . . . But underneath it all, it's about building relationships and capacity and getting people to really start thinking about how they can contribute to their own future rather than looking at [the organisation]’.

The outcome-oriented assumption is so widespread among the managers that more of their data was coded to this set of nodes than to any other node. Furthermore, it is repeatedly identified in comments made by *all* of the interviewed managers. Two such examples include: ‘I think if you are bringing people together, you really want their time to be well spent. So you have to think about what it is you are trying to achieve’ (PSM 35); and ‘Our (ie. the executive management team’s) expectation was that they had to get to an outcome’ (NFPM 11). The managers’ normative assumptions are premised on the right of management to make deliberative decisions about goals and outcomes for the groups under their authority.

Importantly, the facilitators’ data provides substantial evidence supporting this finding. There is a considerable volume of facilitators’ data demonstrating that they largely accept this assumption. They are very conscious of the need to produce outcomes from their work with groups. The following quotation from EFac 30 is representative of all of the facilitators in this regard: ‘[the manager said] “you’re the expert, the facilitator, . . . here’s the outcomes I need. Take me through a process that is going to give me that”.’

This finding potentially has significant implications for the understanding of what group facilitation is, and why it is used in organisations. Using facilitation to achieve particular, predetermined outcomes raises questions about the value, accuracy and appropriateness of defining facilitation as *neutral with respect to the content of the group’s tasks and goals*. Indeed, evidence raising such concerns emerges from the managers’ data itself. PSM 62 makes two contradictory comments that openly acknowledge the conundrum created by this ‘outcomes-oriented’ mindset.

I think setting a mandate for a facilitator . . . which is driven by management, actually is one of the dangers because we have this end line of what we want in a certain period of time, and we assume the facilitator is going to get us there; and I think we actually lose sight of what the group actually wants to do.

On the other hand, he opines that in practice:

We actually use facilitators to drive groups. I will be quite open and honest about that, because I think if we don't, we don't get a long way. And in the short term, you know that's when managers sit down with a facilitator and they know where they want to go.

It's not what I would call a traditional or a neutral role of a facilitator but you have to these days. You can't let groups sort of form and storm on their own basis with a facilitator sitting there. It would take too long and we don't have that luxury, that time.

The propensity of managers to assume that they have a unilateral right to determine their groups' outcomes pervades their data, and the facilitators also consistently demonstrate that they operate on the basis of this assumption. As such, it is appropriate to conclude that the use of facilitation can most accurately be described as 'instrumental' in nature. EFac 30 says as much when he states that in his opinion, 'you're that resource that sits in the back and they just bring you in when they need it.'

Consistent with this view, most of the facilitators and managers demonstrate through their accounts that facilitators are used instrumentally. The most explicit account of this was provided by EFac 71. He described a long-term relationship he has with one organisation in which he works with both the Board and the Executive management group, separately and together. His use of 'we' in the following quotation demonstrates both his instrumentality to the organisation, and his allegiance to the CEO and the Executive team, as opposed to the Board, who are clearly 'they' in this description.

This last encounter, *we've* got rid of a lot of [the conflict] . . . there are still elements of it there, [the CEO] thinks. . . . Each year *we* don't know what's going to happen on the day you know, but *we* think *we've* removed a lot of it. . . . There's a new chair of the Board who's helped significantly and *we've* actually got rid of one of the Board members (italics added).

This is demonstrably an intervention where the facilitator's role is not neutral with respect to the outcomes of the group's work. According to his own account, EFac 71 has taken an active, partisan role in achieving the CEO's desired outcomes. If this was an isolated example, it could be dismissed as anomalous. But it is not an isolated example, merely an extreme example that most clearly demonstrates the phenomenon that exists in the data. Many managers recounted similar instances, with PSM 34 detailing how she uses external facilitators in an attempt to influence and control the work of a high-level executive group over which she has no legitimate authority. More broadly, she succinctly expresses this sentiment when she describes facilitators as 'outside insiders', a resource that 'we don't need . . . all the time but we do need them for certain reasons and to gain certain outcomes' (PSM 34). While there are other findings to emerge from this study, it is the finding that facilitation is instrumental rather than neutral which is the most critical contingency factor influencing the use of group facilitation in organisations. The implications of it for the theory and practice of both facilitation and management are explored in the following section.

## DISCUSSION

At one level, this finding is neither surprising nor inconsistent with emphases on the importance of achieving outcomes that pervade the facilitation literature (Phillips & Phillips 1993; Kiser 1998). At another level, however, the implications of this finding suggest that a reassessment of the widely used definitions of facilitation is in order. In particular, it calls into question the efficacy of the belief in facilitator neutrality which is shared throughout much of the group facilitation literature (eg. Hogan 2002; McFadzean, Somersall & Coker 1999). In these works, it is argued that facilitation must be neutral. Wong (2005:176) describes it as a 'central tenet' and an 'absolute imperative . . . [which] cannot be overstated.' In contrast, this finding suggests that such an understanding appears to be either naïve, or unrealistically optimistic when operationalised. The contention of this paper is that neutrality, when applied to group facilitation, may be conceptually more complex than the facilitation literature has hitherto described it to be; or it may represent an ideal that can rarely (if ever) be achieved or demonstrated.

The wider scholarly corpus deals at length with the notion of neutrality, often at a highly philosophical level (eg. de Marneffe 2006; Dworkin, 1985). de Marneffe's description of it as 'slippery' seems particularly apt with regard to facilitation. Among facilitation writers, some writers hint at the conundrum. Schulte (1999:17) optimistically suggests that 'staying neutral is difficult but essential. The facilitator must rid himself or herself of personal opinion or bias', as if rationally deciding to do this is all that is required to make it happen. Schuman (1996:71) notes that 'the person whose job is to manage the process . . . has an enormous influence on the process and, consequently, the outcome. This person's choice influences the group at a fundamental level.' In criticising such views, Aakhus (2001) suggests that the notion of neutrality has its genesis in the distinction between 'content' and 'process' that pervades the literature. Acceptance of this distinction 'makes it plausible to say that [the facilitator] influences without influencing' (Aakhus 2001:361). He goes on to question the legitimacy of the distinction (p.361):

The very line between process and content that . . . facilitators dare not cross, for fear of being seen as manipulative, is not found in the material conditions of their work. . . . It is an analytic distinction that is taken to be a natural fact about communication. . . . [It] provides a warrant for explaining how . . . facilitator intervention is non-manipulative, and thus palatable to clients and practitioners.

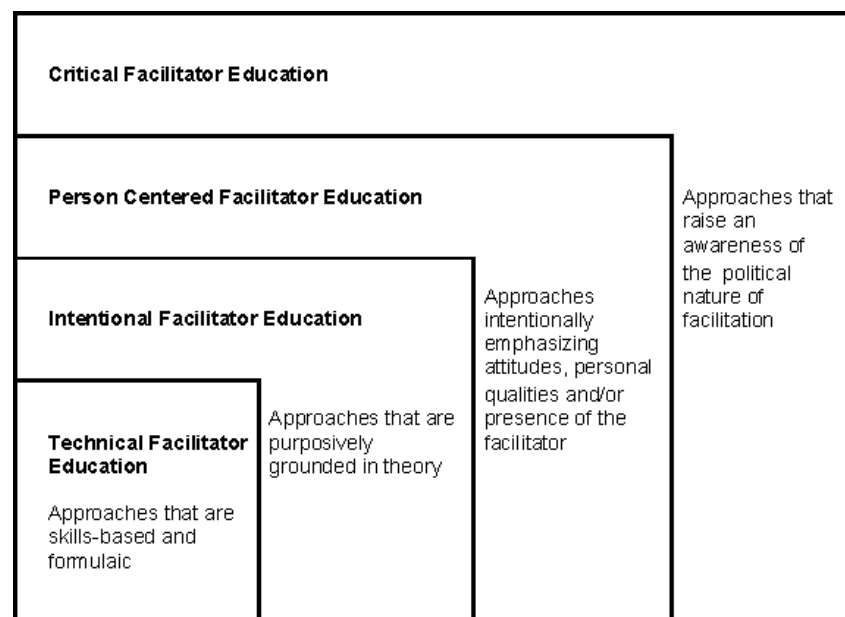
The evidence from this study endorses this scepticism. In spite of the definition of facilitation adopted for this study, both managers and facilitators consistently report that content-related contributions are often valued and desired by managers and groups alike. Indeed, to refrain from contributing content in

many of the situations described would result in less effective facilitation than what can be achieved by contributing content. As such, the data demonstrates that the line distinguishing 'process' contributions from 'content' contributions is not the clear, distinct, or rigid line that is frequently depicted. In addition, there are other occasions in the data which demonstrate that neutrality is sacrificed or called into question without the facilitator contributing content. The distinction that is commonly drawn between content and process is called into question. It is a theoretical construct that cannot easily and consistently be operationalised.

In this regard, the study endorses the findings of other recent empirical studies. Cooren et al. (2006) analyse the actions of closely-observed facilitators working with an organisational group and reach a similar conclusion, suggesting that the facilitators used an interesting strategy of 'positioning oneself as a non-contributor while contributing something' (p. 559). As previously noted, Kirk & Broussine (2000) refute the notion of facilitator neutrality, noting that the political context and existing organisational power relations in which the facilitation takes place necessarily cause both the act of using facilitation, and the facilitator themselves, to be non-neutral. Additional studies reported by Broussine et al. (1998) and Drennon & Cervero (2002) demonstrate the impact of organisational politics on facilitated groups. Gregory & Romm (2001) suggest that one means of acknowledging the conundrum and still working in relative impartiality is to adopt what they call 'critical facilitation'. This requires the facilitator to be willing to have their own actions and contributions in the group subjected to critical scrutiny by the group, as part of the group's work. They reason that this dispels some of the privilege and power that accord to the role of facilitator by reason of their function as 'group leader' (Drennon & Cervero 2002).

This finding may also have implications that pertain to the training and development of facilitators. Facilitator education has received increased attention in recent years. The IAF has developed a 'facilitator competency model' which notionally identifies the capabilities necessary for IAF certification as a facilitator (Baker & Fraser 2005). This has been endorsed as a positive development by some writers (eg. Hogan 2000), and drawn criticism from others (eg. Ringer 2002). Ringer's central criticism is that a competency approach represents a kind of reductionism that cannot adequately account for the subjective and unconscious elements of group life that none-the-less exert influence. He argues that highly skilled and competent facilitators can, and should be able to, manage these aspects of group life, and that these subjective components of facilitation cannot be reduced and measured by rationally-derived criteria. Thomas (2006) has endeavoured to develop a model of facilitator education that incorporates Ringer's criticism. In doing so, he has proposed a 'typology of

facilitator education’ which depicts a variety of approaches ranging from a skills-based ‘formulaic’ approach to a ‘critical’ approach that is cognisant of the political dimensions associated with facilitation (see Figure 1). Within this framework, the awareness of issues associated with the neutrality of facilitation only comes sharply into focus at this more sophisticated and critical level of cognition.



**Figure 1:** Dimensions of Facilitator Education (Thomas 2006:4)

The finding reported in this paper identifies the need to re-examine definitional issues associated with both the conceptualisation of group facilitation, and approaches to operationalising this understanding. Further research is needed to verify this and other findings that emerge from this study and to examine their generalisability. If confirmed, the implications of these findings extend to the training and development of facilitators, who will benefit, as Kirk & Broussine (2000) and Thomas (2006; 2007) suggest, from increasing their awareness of their political role in organisations. Furthermore, it may prove to be beneficial if facilitators engage with managers and groups alike to transparently explore the political dimensions of their actions in organisations.

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