

# CHAPTER 1



# Understanding Facilitation as a Nuanced Skill



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**Unlocking**  
*the*  
**MAGIC**  
*of*  
**Facilitation**



# Understanding Facilitation as a Nuanced Skill

*“Art is not what you see, but what you make  
others see.”*

*- Edgar Degas*

Facilitation is a challenging subject to teach. It’s in the face of this challenge, we suspect, that most folks don’t even bother trying to formally teach it. Most facilitators learn how to facilitate in one of four ways, presented here in most-to-least formal: (1) in a retreat or mini-retreat setting where the material to be facilitated is covered, and a few general pointers about facilitation are presented (e.g., “Ask open-ended questions.... Avoid values statements....”); (2) shadowing or co-facilitating with an experienced facilita-

tor; (3) being a participant in someone else's facilitation and thinking "I could totally do that;" or (4) being given a packet with some instructions, put in front of a room full of people, after someone saying "you can totally do this."

If you've participated in any of the above forms of facilitator training, you may have noticed something we noticed: it's less training on *how* to facilitate, and more training on *what* you'll be facilitating. In this book, and in the following three sections in particular, we are doing the exact opposite. We are presenting to you lessons we've learned—from other facilitators, from unrelated researchers, and from our own 1000+ hours of experience facilitating—focusing on developing the skill that is facilitation.

The primary reason facilitation is so difficult to teach is because of how nuanced it is. There is no one right way to do it (indeed, everyone does it differently); there is no credential or requisite experience necessary (indeed, most of us only have the training mentioned above); and the only way you can get good is by practicing it a lot (indeed, indeed, indeed). In this chapter, we'll expand on these ideas, and in the following chapters, we will dig deep into them.

## ELEMENTS OF A NUANCED SKILL

There are a few key things about facilitation that it shares with other nuanced skills (like golf, interior decorating, and pronouncing the word "nuanced"). Understanding these elements—how they affect your ability to facilitate, your perceptions of facilitation or other facilitators—is integral to processing the learning in the following chapters. So what makes a skill nuanced?

EVERYONE DOES IT DIFFERENTLY.

Great facilitators do not all facilitate alike. Some are adept at staying in touch with their participants' moods, energies, and needs; others know just how to keep your attention; others can invite an entire group to participate no matter what the topic. It's easy to be seduced into the idea that there's a "right" way to do it, a model to emulate; but we all have different ways of being great facilitators. There is no one right way.

EVERYONE COMES TO IT FROM DIFFERENT PLACES,  
WITH DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS.

Have you ever watched someone golfing and said, "That looks so easy"? Have you ever tried golfing? It's great, if you enjoy a little fresh air to accompany your torture. Some people learn to golf as kids, some take lessons, some have to do it for work, some are naturals, some are not. Facilitation is the same way. There's no one way people come to don the Facilitator Cap, and there is no formal or requisite past experience one needs to do it, nor to do it well. And while it looks easy to some bystanders, facilitation is anything but.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT.

We hope this book can expedite your learning process. Our goal here is for you to benefit from a few thousand words of wisdom gleaned from thousands of hours of practice. That said, know that this book is not a substitute for practice in front of a group. Give yourself grace, knowing that regardless of how much you prep, or how fastidiously you apply the lessons from this book, there is going to be a (steep, mountainous, but super fun) learning curve when you get in the front of the room.

## RESPECTING (AND APPRECIATING) THE NUANCE OF FACILITATION

Like most great art forms, facilitation, when done well, looks effortless. The facilitator moves and flows and asks and listens, and hours fly by. In a response to powerful facilitation, participants often register comments in feedback forms that allude to “how surprised” they are by how much they learned, or how quickly the time passed. And like most great art forms, there is a masterful intention behind every decision—a vision for the final painting that forms with the first brushstroke.

In the next several chapters, and then in the following two sections of the book, we are going to introduce you to and explain the often-invisible techniques master facilitators use in every training. At first glance, the chapter headings may register as unrelated, or even disinteresting (i.e., *I don't need to know this to facilitate*), but we ask that you trust us: these are the things we wish we had known before starting our facilitator journeys, and we won't lead you astray.



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