

## 5.5: Facilitating the Task-Oriented Group

### Learning Objectives

1. Define “group facilitation”
2. Identify five guidelines for facilitating a task-oriented group
3. Distinguish between collaboration and “coliberation”

*Remember the story that Pope John XXIII told about himself. He admitted, “It often happens that I wake at night and begin to think about a serious problem and decide I must tell the Pope about it. Then I wake up completely and remember that I am the Pope.” - Glenn van Ekeren*

*I’m extraordinarily patient provided I get my own way in the end. - Margaret Thatcher*

You’ve probably experienced being part of groups that pleased and motivated you. One reason you experienced those positive feelings may have been that the groups planned and executed their tasks so smoothly that you were hardly aware the processes were taking place. In this section, we’ll examine ways in which leaders can contribute to such pleasant, easy experiences.

Just as “facile” in English and “fácil” in Spanish mean “easy,” the word “facilitate” itself means “to make something easy” and “group facilitation” consists in easing a group’s growth and progress. Most student, community, and business groups are task-oriented, so we’ll consider here how they can most easily be guided toward accomplishing the tasks they set for themselves. Another section of this book deals specifically with the details of leading meetings, so for now we’ll consider broader questions and principles.

If you’re in a position to facilitate a group, you need to take that position seriously. Just as Pope John XXIII realized with respect to his authority and responsibility in the Catholic Church, it’s best to consider yourself the primary source of direction and the ultimate destination for questions in your group. With those concepts in mind, let’s consider five major guidelines you should probably follow in order to facilitate a group whose purposes include achieving tasks.

### Know the Group's Members

This means more than just identifying their names and recognizing their faces. If you hope to accomplish anything significant together, you need to be familiar with people’s opinions, their needs, their desires, and their personalities.

Perhaps one member of a group you’re leading is particularly time-conscious, another likes to make jokes, and a third prefers to see concepts represented visually. If you take these propensities into account and respond to them as much as possible, you can draw the best cooperative effort from each of the people.

You may want to keep track of who’s done what favors for whom within the group, too. Like it or not, many people operate at least from time to time on the principle that “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine.”

### Weigh Task and Relationship Considerations

The word “equilibristic” is sometimes applied to the actions of athletes and musicians. It refers to a capability to balance differing and sometimes conflicting forces so as to maintain continuous movement in a chosen direction.

Although almost any group has some work to do, and all groups comprise people whose welfare needs to be tended to, the effective facilitator realizes that it’s impossible to emphasize both those elements to the same degree all the time. If people are disgruntled or frustrated, they can’t contribute well to accomplishing a task. Likewise, if people are always contented with one another and their group but can’t focus on getting things done, the group will be unable to attain its objectives. To facilitate a group well, thus, requires that you be equilibristic.

### Understand and Anticipate Prevalent Features of Human Psychology

Keep in mind that everyone in a group will perceive what the facilitator does in light of his or her own circumstances and wishes.

Recall also that everyone possesses diverse and numerous capacities for self-justification and self-support. In their book *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*, Carol Tavris and Ellion Aronson referred to studies of married couples’ behavior. They indicated that when husbands and wives are asked what proportion of the housework they perform, the totals always exceed 100 percent by a large margin. (Tavris, C., & Aronson, E. (2007). *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt). Tavris and Aronson also described the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, which presents visitors with interactive exhibits portraying categories of

people about whom many of us harbor negative preconceptions—including ethnic and racial minorities, obese individuals, people with disabilities, and so on. A video attempts to persuade visitors that they possess prejudices, after which two doors are offered as an exit. One is marked “Prejudiced” and the other is labeled “Unprejudiced.” The second door is locked, to make the point that all of us are indeed subject to prejudice.



Figure 5.5.1: Source: [www.flickr.com/photos/jeffsand/1466204908/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/jeffsand/1466204908/)

### Deal Well With Disruptions

The playwright Paddy Chayevsky wrote that “life is problems.” An effective group facilitator needs to anticipate and skillfully cope with problems as a part of life, whether they’re caused by other people’s behavior or by physical and logistical factors.

If you’re an adherent of Theory Y, you probably believe that people enjoy pursuing their goals energetically, in groups or individually. You also probably believe that people prefer to select times and places along the way to relax and recharge. Unfortunately, interruptions often arise in such a way as to make both these aims difficult to achieve. Think about all the unexpected academic, family, and work-related reasons why you and other students you know have found it challenging to “stay the course” toward your personal and collective goals.

A group’s facilitator, thus, needs to make sure that interruptions and disruptions don’t derail it. In fact, he or she might profit from actually celebrating these elements of life, as one Seattle office executive did. According to Dale Turner, the executive’s office had a sign on the wall reading “Don’t be irritated by interruptions. They are your reason for being.” Turner went on to quote the executive as saying “Happily, I have learned how to sit loose in the saddle of life, and I’m not usually disturbed by interruptions. I have made it a habit through the years to leave a stretch factor in my daily schedule. I start early and have tried not to so crowd my day with appointments that I have no time for the unexpected. I have not seen interruptions as an intrusion.” (Turner, D. (1991, March 23). Slaves of habit—we lose when there’s no room for interruptions in our lives. *Seattle Times*. Retrieved from ProQuest Database).

### Keep Returning to the Task

You’ve probably been part of a group in which the leader or facilitator had what might be called a divergent, rather than a convergent, personality. Perhaps that person had lots of good ideas but seemed to jump around from topic to topic and chore to chore so much that your head spun and you couldn’t keep track of what was going on. Maybe the person “missed the forest for the trees” because of dwelling excessively on minutia—small and insignificant details. Or perhaps each time you met with the group its facilitator led a discussion of something valuable and important, but every time it was a different thing.

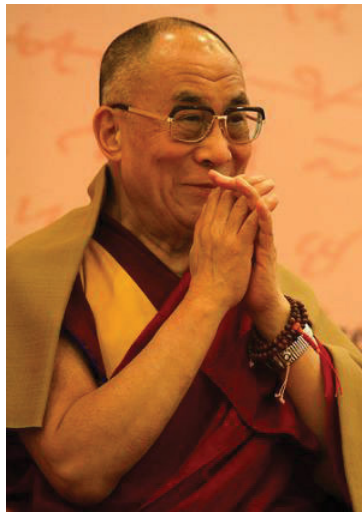


Figure 5.5.2: Source: [www.flickr.com/photos/36668473@N05/4133002232/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/36668473@N05/4133002232/)

The organizational theorist Anthony Jay wrote that it's important for leaders to "look for problems through a telescope, not a microscope." (Jay, A. (1967). *Management and Machiavelli: An inquiry into the politics of corporate life*. New York: Bantam Books). He also contended that, as far as a leader is concerned, "other people can cope with the waves, it's [the leader's] job to watch the tide." By these comments, Jay meant that the primary duty of a group facilitator is to maintain an unwavering focus on the group's central tasks, whatever they may be.

The Dalai Lama has written, "Whether you are a spiritual leader or a leader in an organization, it is your job to inspire faith." (His Holiness the Dalai Lama & Muyzenberg, L. (2009). *The leader's way: The art of making the right decisions in our careers, our companies, and the world at large*. New York: Broadway Books). Slogans, mottos, mission statements, quotations, logos, and written objectives can all contribute to a facilitator's ability to inspire faith by maintaining a group's focus and resolve to move in a common direction. Busy students and others in our society often need reminders like these to block out the competing stimuli surrounding them and focus their attention. Such mechanisms, however, should not be merely gimmicks, nor should they be used to promote blind faith in the group's facilitator.

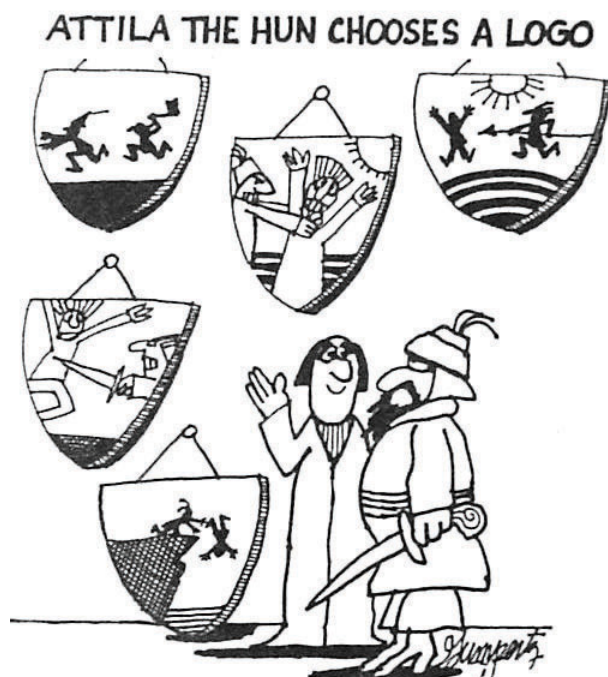


Figure 5.5.3

Another way to think of how a facilitator should keep bringing the group's attention back to its tasks relates to the process of meditation. Practitioners of meditation know that people's minds are naturally active and tend to move readily from subject to

subject. When someone is meditating, they say, thoughts will naturally pop into his or her mind. The way to deal with this phenomenon is to regard the thoughts as clouds drifting across the sky. Rather than trying to banish them, the better approach is to allow them to pass by and dissipate, and then to return to serene contemplation. (Rondon, N. (2006, Meditate. *Current Health* 2 (32), 20–23. Retrieved from ProQuest Database).

## Coliberation

Above all, a facilitator's responsibility is to enable members of a group to function together as easily and happily as possible as they pursue their goals. When this happens, the group will achieve a high level of collaboration. In fact, it may rise beyond collaboration to achieve what the author and computer game designer Bernard DeKoven called "coliberation." In speaking about meetings, he had this to say: "Good meetings aren't just about work. They're about fun—keeping people charged up. It's more than collaboration, it's 'coliberation'—people freeing each other up to think more creatively." (Matson, E. (1996, April-May). The seven sins of deadly meetings. *Fast Company*, 122).

## Key Takeaway

To facilitate a task-oriented group requires several skills and behaviors and can lead to a state of "coliberation."

### Exercise 5.5.1

1. Recall a time when you were in a group whose leader stressed either its task or relationship factors too much. How did the members of the group react? Did the leader eventually develop an equilibristic approach?
2. Do you agree with the business executive who said that interruptions are "your reason for being"? In your studies and family life, what measures do you take to ensure that interruptions are beneficial rather than destructive? What further steps do you feel you might take in this direction?
3. Think of someone who effectively facilitated a group you were part of. Did the person perform the job identified by the Dalai Lama—inspiring faith in the group? If so, how?
4. What, if anything, do you feel members of most groups need to be "coliberated" from?

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