

Facilitation: Adding Value to the Methodologies

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Dr Roy Woodhead is Senior Lecturer at Oxford Brookes University and is also a qualified Trainer in Value Management (TVM) and a Professional in Value Management (PVM) under the European Value Management Training and Certification programme. He has been researching different value methodologies and creative group decision-making for around ten years. Central to this work has been the realisation that the Job Plan conducted by different facilitators can lead to very different outcomes. As the Job Plan has remained constant, the source of variability must come from the people associated with the value study. This has led to further research that seeks to develop insights and skills related to greater interpersonal skills and facilitation. The unfolding realisations from this research direction are now being shared in order to fuel debate and professional learning.

ABSTRACT

As organisations adapt to the knowledge-based economies, the challenge facing management is how to empower and control innovative teams. Employees are no longer “paid from the neck down” and managers can now openly admit that they do not know all the answers without losing esteem. Value Management and Value Engineering offer models for this knowledge engineering function by using facilitators rather than day to day leadership. This paper argues facilitation is different than classical views of leadership (Fayol, 1949; Drucker, 1968) and examines a series of arguments drawn from the literature and ethnographic research (Woodhead, 1998). Its purpose is to view value-practice from the perspective of the ‘facilitator and the group’ rather than the detailed examination of the particular value methodology being used. The conclusions develop from the arguments within the paper to contend that from a facilitation perspective each value study should be designed to meet the unique requirements of each value study and that there is an emphasised need for more diagnosis in the pre-event stage; its assumption is that this will allow value adding methodologies to be perceived as bespoke rather than a commodity type service by clients.

INTRODUCTION

Facilitation is taken here to be different than directive leadership. Directive leadership is viewed as a situational power method of getting others to follow commands. In extreme cases directive leadership imposes a superior-subordinate

relationship where the will of one is more powerful than the many. Words such as “manager”, “boss”, “chief” encapsulate the power and position aspects which establish identity, role and authority. In certain situations the need for a single leader is probably the best strategy a group can adopt. The implicit assumption is that one person is better equipped to lead than the group is itself. However in other situations this may not always lead to the best solution as such relationships may also cause poor communication and information being strategically withheld. Janis (1972) analysed group decision-making units involved in episodes such as “The Bay of Pigs” invasion of Cuba. His aim was to uncover what had gone wrong so that dysfunctional decision-making could be avoided. He described this dysfunctional decision-making “Group think” and identified five common features:

- The group making the decision is very cohesive
- The group is insulated from information outside the group
- Decision-makers rarely systematically searched through alternatives to appraise the merits of other options
- The group is under some stress and needs to make a decision urgently
- The group is dominated by a directive leader

A group's collective experiences and memory is an internal resource. Information outside the group is an external resource. The facilitator thus uses a methodology that overcomes groupthink and leads to a 'more' considered solution by using all the resources more effectively than would be the case otherwise. The facilitator's methodology could be Value Engineering, Value Management or a host of other decision process models. What VE and VM methodologies provide is a structure to the way in which the group's resources are used efficiently to achieve an outcome, which is effective.

In situations and contexts where the directive leader's views dominate, challenges might be received on a personal level and seen as a bid for power within the group dynamic. Some members of the group, influenced by the organisation's pecking order and culture may choose to keep their own council and in doing so inadvertently promote groupthink. The neutral facilitator can create a temporary environment in which such barriers to communication are undermined so that the group's intellectual resources are used with greater effectiveness. Neutral means that the group's decision, or fate, will have no consequences for the facilitator. The neutral facilitator should have no preferences or vested interest in the outcome of the value study. The reality is that facilitators do have a vested interest in having the value study perceived as being successful and this fact can lead to a loss of neutrality that demands an ethical stance on the part of the facilitator. As neutrality is rarely the case, Schwarz (1994) argues for "substantially neutral".

HOW FACILITATORS CAN MAKE GROUPS MORE EFFECTIVE

Ringelmann (1913) conducted a rope-pulling test where individuals tested their strength by lifting a weight over a pulley. The heaviest weight for each individual was then recorded. All the heaviest weights were then totalled and the individuals formed into a group to pull the aggregated load. It was assumed that the group would perform better than the sum of the individuals, but this proved to be elusive. For many years Ringelmann's experiment had negative ramifications for those advocating group activity. Latene et al (1982) argued that individuals do not work as hard in a group decision making process because they can 'hide in the group' and coined the potentially pejorative phrase "social loafing". Steiner (1982) argued that the reason for Ringelmann's results was that groups fail to use their resources in an optimum way. Holt (1987) tested Steiner's assertions and repeated Ringelmann's experiment. This time a facilitator talked with the team about how they would work together as a single unit.

Holt recognised that Ringelmann's experiment did not coordinate the subjects' efforts. Where individuals stood and how they held the rope in relation to others may have worked against their collective potential by introducing conflicting and counter active forces. Holt's facilitated intervention under the same experimental conditions as Ringelmann led the groups to exceed the predicted productivity by up to 19%. Following on from this same argument, a facilitator with a value methodology can thus add value to a group by designing strategies for group decision-making that allow them to use their intellectual resources more productively.

In relation to VM, the task or problem being studied often becomes a purpose which temporarily allows the decision making process to be directed by a seemingly neutral methodology rather than a directive leader. However, if during a value study the common purpose or problem being studied is challenged, reliance on the Job Plan alone may lead to confusion and polarisation within the group as conflicts between the Job Plan's demands, the group's dynamics and the facilitator's skills at managing the group-culture, begin to simmer and boil. If some members feel a hidden agenda is being pushed through by those with more power (e.g. the CEO) then facilitation skills become very important as the need to achieve consensus is necessary if sabotage or lip-service is to be avoided later in the process or even during implementation. In such situations the Job Plan provides a task-directional process that the facilitator can enrich with inter-personal skills by explaining the workshop's purpose in the larger context of the project and organisations. Where the value methodology is not meaningful, or the facilitator lacks credibility, the group can experience conflict as different strategies compete to influence the direction of thinking and the use of resources available to them.

Various Job Plans that begin with the "Information stage" start the decision-making process within the current situation. In some instances this can be counter productive as the current situation has too many negative aspects such as project politics, insecurity and a competitive spirit which denies information sharing. By approaching the same value study from a facilitation perspective it is possible to include elements of the creative stage within the information stage so that the group begins with a future-vision and can be asked "Where is it that you would like to be in say three years time?". Rather than encouraging people to look around themselves to define where they are now and reinforcing the negative aspects, the group is encouraged to look forward, and then asked "How will you get there?". Tools such as FAST

could thus be used in the opening session of the workshop to describe a strategic vision for the group. By starting with a future vision the baggage which traps them in the current situation can be jettisoned. The facilitator thus diagnoses the group's need during the pre-event and designs a value methodology and facilitation strategy to suit their particular needs. In other words the facilitator needs to have a range of methodologies that will be relevant to the group's conversations.

This change of emphasis from value methodology to facilitation strategy also allows the VM and VE community to review some of its old debates and view them in a different light. For example, the arguments between Customer and Technical FAST need not be about one approach being superior to the other. From a facilitation perspective the differences between the two approaches are understood in terms of their appropriateness to the situation being studied. Examination of the differences between Customer FAST and Technical FAST at Oxford Brookes University suggested the Customer FAST is better suited to holistic thinking at a generalised level of abstraction and Technical FAST to a more focused level of thinking that moves to a detailed level. The group working on a particular problem thus decides which method is better. If a group argues this FAST is too abstract or that FAST is too focused, then the facilitator can adapt the technique to suit the dictates of the situation. That is, with an emphasis placed on facilitation, it becomes possible to develop hybrids of the two, if that is meaningful for the group in a given situation. In some cases the elicitation of functions alone may satisfy the needs of the group. The facilitator's task is to help the group progress towards a predefined outcome; the map to that outcome must adapt to the terrain under foot.

A CLOSER LOOK AT FACILITATION

Schwarz (1994) describes a relationship between the facilitator and the group process. This in turn has a relationship with group structure and group effectiveness defined by the organisational context. Within the group process Schwarz sees problem solving methodologies, decision making process, conflict management between participants, communication and boundary management of the group's identity in relation to the larger organisation. It is this boundary management which marks the interface of the workshop to the larger world that influences how ideas can win through to be both influential and implemented. Hunter, Bailey and Taylor (1996) see the relationships and facilitation of groups in an interventionist mode. Their facilitator performance attributes have been modified by the author to

allow ease of reading, but essentially they say the facilitator must:

- Acknowledge the uniqueness of all individuals.
- Acknowledge the baggage brought to workshops such as ideas, beliefs, fears, hopes, that prevent group members from being 'fully present'.
- Direct the process but not the content of the group.
- Be sensitive to power issues which may undermine group effectiveness.
- That feelings are important and need to be acknowledged.
- That a group develops trust and identity through sharing.
- That groups have a life cycle which Heron (1989) describes as Winter, Spring, Summer, Autumn.
- That people sometimes get stuck in a role such as placater, blocker, devil's advocate without realising it.
- That group process is about helping the group achieve their tasks.
- That the group can reassign roles such as the facilitator, the recorder and the time keeper if consensus is achieved.
- That all are clear about the purpose of the meeting.
- That necessary ground rules are set to clarify and protect individuals and the group.
- That listening and speaking are important.
- That withholding is 'not saying' things that need to be said and detracts from group effectiveness.
- That conflict within groups is natural and needs to be attended to and worked through properly if later repercussions are to be avoided.
- That genuine collective or consensus decision-making is necessary for the group's success when implementation in the larger organisation begins.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the art of facilitation is about creating a safe supportive environment in which a collection of individuals becomes an effective decision making unit. Each workshop must be seen in the context of a larger value programme which may contain many value studies and other value adding services such as organisational development sessions. Every unique value study must consider the climate and culture in which a workshop will run. We need to recognise that standardised approaches such as singular views of a particular Job Plan carry many assumptions about how people engage with a specific value methodology. As groups grow in number/size the inter-personal dynamics between the members becomes more complex. The ability to include all the people in the room means workshops need to be designed. During the pre-event a diagnosis of the group's requirements at each stage of a Job Plan means that a basic approach to designing workshops needs to consider:

- What the facilitator is doing.
- What the particular episode of the workshop requires in terms of inputs, outputs and environment/culture.
- What each member of the group will be doing.
- What time has been allowed for the episode.
- What fallback positions/ supportive strategies may be required if the group wanders from the preconceived plan.

Participants that are not engaged in the process can be seen as human resources not being worked to their full potential; the reality may need to allow individuals 'time-out' as the energy needed for full participation can be draining. During the workshop, the facilitator unfolds a pre-designed methodology whilst managing time, getting participation, ensuring all minds are present and awake, that a sense of future is established, issues are drawn out, that the group keeps on task and that the pace and level of energies are monitored, that when people are stuck in roles we ask questions and support them in order to cut through the patterned behaviour as well as ensuring a safe environment so that things which are not being said are aired. The needs of the facilitator must also be acknowledged as such high levels of energy and investment require the facilitator to recharge her/his batteries after the workshop. We as facilitators need to identify agreement and disagreement so that learning takes place with feedback and acknowledgement in the workshops and also within the value community.

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