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Twelve Common Facilitation Errors in Organisational Change

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Avoid These Facilitation and Design Mistakes

The value of a facilitator in change initiatives is the degree to which they foster free flowing conversations among participants, related to the job in hand. When participants have the opportunity to talk in normal conversations, they make meaning of the work they are involved with and the changes that you are proposing. For example, through normal conversation, people can come up with new ideas, identify the implications of a change for their business group, propose a collaboration between two groups or understand a situation from the other person's perspective.

This has implications for facilitators of change events. Many of the techniques facilitators use actually close conversation down rather than opening them up. Here are twelve facilitation techniques to avoid when facilitating group sessions during change initiatives.

1. Creating structured activities that are engaging but do not foster real conversation about real things going on in the work place (e.g. cutting articles out of newspapers, getting people to vote on arbitrary rating scales). Many of these activities infantilise the participants.
2. Being more intent on getting through your predetermined programme than meeting the needs of the participants in relation to the change.
3. Building in restrictions for the conversation (e.g. speaking only one sentence at a time) that interfere with the natural ebb and flow and repetitions of normal conversation.

4. Getting participants to talk to the flipchart or to the facilitator, but not to each other. Many "debriefs" from brainstorming activities are like this.
5. Regarding participants talking to each other as a waste of time, something to be discouraged. The most lively conversations seem to happen at breaks when people are allowed to talk freely to each other.
6. Closing conversations down rather than opening them up.
7. Diverting attention from what is important to participants, for example through skits or artificially upbeat presentations.
8. Generating ideas in brainstorming sessions but never discussing the merits of the ideas.
9. Asking questions you already know the answers to in order to reach the predetermined outcome – this amounts to a subtle manipulation.
10. Using devices that touch on, but avoid, dealing with real concerns, for example getting people to write their concerns on yellow stickies and posting them anonymously on a flipchart (never to be seen again), or posting anonymous ratings of how we are getting along at the moment or how we are doing as a team. If the items raised by these techniques are not discussed in the group then they amount to disguised manipulative techniques to get the group to think that something has been done just by undertaking the exercise.
11. Getting through a set number of Powerpoint slides in the time available e.g. "These ones are not relevant to you so I'll just go through them quickly."
12. Having a pre-set agenda that gets in the way of what is meaningful to the participants (e.g. "Even though we know the answers now, we won't answer your questions about your desks you will have because according to our plan we will address that in stage 2, which takes place next month.")

These are examples that I have seen over the last four years or so. The embarrassing thing is that in the past I have been guilty of some of them myself!