

### CHOOSING A FACILITATOR? What to look for.

A facilitator is someone who helps a group to achieve what it wants to achieve. 'Group' here can be of different sizes: ranging from perhaps five to several hundred. Common challenges for a group are the complexity of the task, the complexity of a diverse group of participants, and/or potential or actual tensions in the relationships between participants.

Choices that you will have to make are:

- Will it be the facilitation of an event or of a process (with successive events)?
- One facilitator or also co-facilitators?
- A facilitator from within the group, an external one, or a mix of both?
- What competencies do you want the facilitator to bring?

Let's start with the competencies, because a very experienced facilitator may help you make some of the other choices.

**Methods:** There are facilitators whose strengths are entirely methodological. They should be able to offer more than one potential method of group work but will not engage with the content the group works on, or with the interpersonal or team/group dynamics. Some of them have methods that are most appropriate for smaller to middle-sized groups (say five to forty). Some have (also) methods for larger groups, even a few hundred. An important attention point here is their ability to adapt to the group dynamics, or not. Certain facilitators are heavily invested in their 'method': they will make the group work for the method, even if the method doesn't work well for them. This can become counterproductive.

**Content expertise:** Other facilitators have methodological competencies but also some expertise of the content or issue the group is working on. This can be an advantage as they may turn out to be a useful resource person also in this regard. Obviously, they need to refrain from imposing their own view, but can bring added value if they act as a friendly but also critical sounding board, helping the group think deeper and afresh by asking insightful questions.

**Interpersonal skills:** Group work can be complicated by relational tensions. Formal and informal power dynamics occur in virtually all group interactions: they can result from organisational hierarchies but also e.g. from different levels of information about the topic under discussion, unequal mastery of the in-house jargon, or varying degrees of self-confidence. Personal likes and dislikes between individuals may also affect the collaboration. Every facilitator must have strong interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence and be able to deal with relational tensions. That is not a methodological competency. It requires a certain personal maturity with good self-awareness.

**Sitting in the fire:** Where tensions are high or when the group comes together to improve its own functioning, you will need a facilitator with specific skills in individual, relationship and team coaching. Here it is critical that the methods chosen are appropriate for the situational dynamics and emotional atmosphere. Sometimes facilitators are called upon to help groups that have been affected by open, even violent, conflict. There emotions will run high, and drive the behaviours within the group, but

possibly also towards the facilitator, at least for an initial period. Personal maturity now becomes a critical characteristic for a facilitator who may find herself or himself '*sitting in the fire*'.

**Cross-cultural:** Groups can be made up of people with different cultural backgrounds. That may be the result of growing up in different societies with different norms about e.g. respect for age, hierarchy, 'leadership', the expression or not of emotion, dress code, politeness, decision-making etc. Language proficiency may be an issue here: not everyone may master the dominant language for the group work equally well. That may be disempowering for some. You then want one (or more) facilitator(s) with different language skills, and/or someone who speaks the prevailing language clearly and slowly enough. There can, of course, also be different work cultures among people from the same society: generally speaking, the public, private and not-for-profit sectors have somewhat different ways of operating, although within each sector there can also be significant differences between the cultures of individual organisations. Does your facilitator have enough cross-cultural competencies?

**External and internal facilitators:** The above observations indicate that, in many instances, an external facilitator is preferable over someone who is closely associated with the group. Co-facilitators will be needed when a group will regularly split up for smaller-group work, or when the event is longer than a day: a facilitator needs to keep an eye on the situation at hand, but also on the overall atmosphere, dynamics and flow of the group process. S/he will need to be able to step back from time to time, to consider possible adjustments. 'Internal' people may be assisting an external lead facilitator as co-facilitators. That can help develop facilitation competencies within the group – but attention will be needed that they are not too implicated in the issue (and relational tensions) at hand and have the right personality and competencies.

**Preparation:** The above observations also indicate the importance for an external facilitator to be able to get a feel for the group, its history and (likely) dynamics, prior to the actual gathering s/he facilitates. Fifty percent of a successful facilitation depends on the prior preparation. An experienced facilitator will want to know the space(s) the group work will take place in (the layout and atmosphere of a space have significant impact on group dynamics), but also what the purpose is, who decided it, what history the group (and different participants) has (have) with the issue it will work on, and where participants come from. S/he may also inquire which participants have strong personalities and/or formal authority and may come to dominate the group, and about possible tensions between, and sensitivities of, certain participants. A good facilitator will pick up these issues during the actual work, but such prior insights enable a positive start. Some facilitators may want to speak with several key participants before the event, and in doing so already establish an initial relationship. That is important, because ultimately, the group, including influential people in it, need to have trust in the facilitator, her or his design, methods and interpersonal skills.

**Multi-stakeholder:** Note that there is a significant difference between an intra-group and a multi-stakeholder event or process. In a multi-stakeholder gathering, there are different centres of interest, power and authority; there may not be agreement about the objective of the get together or about who participates when and who not. The degree of relational complexity is per definition much higher. The facilitator(s) will need to gain and maintain basic trust with a variety of interest groups who may not trust each other – and who are asked to have faith in a process that they don't control (but should be allowed to influence). Here it becomes even more important that the facilitator can reach out, early on, to these various interest groups, to establish some basic relationship and hear their views. Adaptation of the event or process design and -facilitation to the evolving dynamics will be key – again something that requires significant experience, skill and maturity.

So, take time to find the right facilitator(s) and make time to brief them adequately prior to the actual collaboration. Allow them to do their preparatory inquiries, then hear their considerations and advice.

*GMI is a value-driven and purpose-oriented consultancy. Supporting collaboration, within and between teams, within and between organisations, and between organisations and other stakeholder groups, is one of its core competencies. Koenraad Van Brabant is an experienced facilitator, with certain areas of thematic expertise as well as a team coach (ORSC: organisational and relationships systems coaching) and certified partnership broker. He has, among other tasks, supported organisations with strategic analysis and planning processes but also through change processes that affected key partnerships; he has facilitated staff retreats on the question of working better together, and trained nationals to be facilitators of multi-stakeholder events and processes in societies where large scale violence created deep divisions, high levels of mistrust and strong emotions.*

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