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Facilitation Competence: A Catalyst for Effective Extension Work

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Facilitation Competence: A Catalyst for Effective Extension Work

Abstract

Quantitative and qualitative data collected from research subjects in a multi-year University of Maine Cooperative Extension staff development initiative showed that in-depth facilitation training and practice can effectively prepare Extension staff to help groups achieve positive change. Facilitation training can lead to effective facilitators as well as more effective group members, demonstrating the long-term organizational and community value of training Extension staff in core facilitation skills.

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Introduction

Extension employees work with and in diverse groups to accomplish organizational, client group, and community goals. Extension programming staff often find themselves expected to fulfill dual roles: to teach specific content, as well as to effectively facilitate groups for positive change. The growing complexity of community issues increasingly prompts the public to look to Extension to play a group facilitation role in a neutral manner.

Morse, Brown, and Warning (2006) challenge us to shift our traditional notion of leadership to one of catalytic leadership at the community level. They state that the programming-driven leadership model of Extension's past must be replaced with one of activating and convening stakeholders and facilitating problem-solving processes that address issues collaboratively. Luke (1998) takes this a step further and identifies facilitation as a key skill for working with groups.

This level of involvement at the community and organizational level requires building facilitation competence among Extension staff. The purpose of the study reported here was to determine the long-term impact of facilitation training to build and enhance facilitation competence within Extension to meet growing community and organizational needs.

Background

The study reported here was based on a multi-year Extension staff development initiative conducted from 2002 to 2003. Using selected Foundational Facilitation Competencies (©IAF™ 2003) identified by the International Association of Facilitators, Extension staff were surveyed to assess their interest in and need for developing or refining group facilitation skills. Fifteen percent of all staff indicated a need for and interest in facilitation skill building.

The needs assessment results align with those of Rilla, Paterson, Manton, and Day (2006), who identify the need for conducting facilitation training for staff regardless of their work title. Others (Haskell & Prichard, 2004) recommend that new facilitators of program leadership teams enhance their facilitation skills with additional training for better group results.

Experienced internal trainers were invited to plan and lead three Group Facilitation programs, each consisting of four 1-day sessions conducted every other week. The time between sessions allowed for skill integration and practice. To enhance integration of facilitation skills, each participant

partnered with a facilitation mentor for 6 to 8 months after the program.

Best training practices based on the experience of the trainers as well as adult education theory were used in the design and delivery of the program. The trainers integrated techniques to create a learning space for optimal participant engagement. Multiple styles of knowing, teaching, and learning reflected and honored individual and collective wisdom and experience. The trainers modeled Best Facilitation Practices (Bens, 2000) to reinforce the learning and allocated time after facilitation activities to reflect about the learning. These elements helped to create a non-judgmental and safe learning environment that has been shown to enhance learning and raise self-confidence (Mitchell & Cramman, 2003).

Methods

Study Population

Forty-five Extension employees participated in the Group Facilitation program. Retirements and resignations left 34 potential research subjects, each of whom received a letter of invitation to participate in this research project. Thirteen participants responded to the invitation and became part of the research project. The research subjects represented these job classifications: classified (2), professional (5), faculty (5), and administration (1).

Data Collection

Quantitative data came from the research subjects interviewed. They self-assessed the facilitation competencies in terms of frequency used during the 2 years since completion of the group facilitation program. All research subjects completed the self-assessment.

Qualitative data came from one-on-one recorded interviews conducted from August-October 2005. The same questions were asked of all research subjects, with clarifying questions asked as needed. The interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy against audiotapes by the researcher. The transcribed interviews were mailed to research subjects for review, and revisions integrated into the final transcription.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were totaled indicating which facilitation skills were used frequently, some of the time, or rarely used. Data about the facilitation skills needing more practice and training were also tabulated.

The qualitative data from the interviews were content analyzed using QSR NVivo computer software. While checking for transcription accuracy, themes and patterns in the interview data were noted and assigned specific nodes (titles). The texts were searched for words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs related to each node. When coding, a link was made to each node. NVivo then compiled all the text for each node. All text was reviewed and summarized for themes within each node.

Results

Quantitative Results

Quantitative data analysis indicates research subjects were able to use the facilitation competencies both in community and organizational settings. The following tables indicate the relative use of skills, knowledge, or behaviors 2 years after completing the Group Facilitation program. The assessment also tracked what skills needed more practice and training.

Skills, knowledge, or behaviors related to the creating and sustaining an environment of participation facilitation competency (Table 1) such as communication skills and developing rapport with the groups were used frequently. The skills of recognizing conflict, providing a safe environment for conflict to surface, and managing conflict were used less frequently. The data indicates that the conflict-related skills needed more practice and training.

Table 1.
Facilitation Competency: Creating and Sustaining an Environment of Participation (N=13)

Skills, Knowledge, or Behaviors	Using Frequently (#)	Using Some of the Time (#)	Rarely Using (#)	Need More Practice & Training (#)
Set ground rules and working agreements	5	5	3	0
Use appropriate language for demographic mix and	10	3	0	0

interest of the group				
Use effective communication skills	7	4	0	2
Develop rapport with the group	11	1	0	1
Use active listening	7	5	0	1
Use a variety of participatory processes	7	4	1	1
Accept all ideas	9	4	0	0
Observe and provide feedback to group members	3	8	0	2
Recognize conflict	4	6	1	2
Provide a safe environment for conflict to surface	4	5	0	3
Manage disruptive behavior	1	7	3	2

The assisting-the-group-to-reflect-on-their-experience skill (Table 2) was used less frequently or rarely used as compared to the other skills that would guide the group to appropriate and useful outcomes. The skills, knowledge, or behaviors related to the planning appropriate group process facilitation competency (Table 3) were rated as being used frequently or some of the time. The skills of arranging space to meet the purpose of the meeting and incorporating multi-sensory activities and approaches were rarely used.

Table 2.
Facilitation Competency: Guiding the Group to Appropriate and Useful Outcomes (N=13)

Skills, Knowledge, or Behaviors	Using Frequently (#)	Using Some of the Time (#)	Rarely Using (#)	Need More Practice & Training (#)
Introduce key concepts and cover key points clearly and concisely	5	6	0	2
Use appropriate questioning techniques to open, delve more deeply or close a conversation to move on	6	5	1	1
Make meaningful transitions from one topic or activity to the next	5	5	1	2
Manage the task and process goals of the meeting	7	4	0	2
Move a group from idea generation to action planning	6	4	2	1
Recognize tangents and redirect to the task	6	7	0	0
Listen, question and summarize group thinking	6	5	0	2
Recap ideas to help a group reach consensus	8	4	0	1
Assist the group to reflect on their experience	2	8	3	0

Table 3.
Facilitation Competency: Planning Appropriate Group Processes (N=13)

Skills, Knowledge, or Behaviors	Using Frequently (#)	Using Some of the Time (#)	Rarely Using (#)	Need More Practice & Training (#)
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Use body language and physical space in ways that encourage participation or refocus discussion	6	5	0	2
Arrange space to meet the purpose of the meeting	9	3	1	0
Balance use of time so that agenda is covered in appropriate depth relative to the needs of the group	4	8	0	1
Know when to move the group and when to stay	3	8	0	2
Be aware of individual learning and thinking styles	7	6	0	0
Draw out participants of all learning/thinking and communication styles	4	8	0	1
Incorporate multi-sensory activities and approaches	4	7	1	1

Qualitative Results

Five major themes surfaced during the content analysis of the data: pre-facilitation training beliefs and assumptions; post-facilitation training beliefs and assumptions; facilitator and group member behaviors; and group member roles.

The interview data suggest that before the training, research subjects perceived meeting outcomes to be a combination of luck and alchemy. One woman reported that "while some meetings had been enjoyable and purposeful, most were frustrating and overwhelming." Facilitation performed by research subjects prior to training had been learned by observing others facilitate. Another woman stated that she "lead meetings by the seat of her pants." Several held the belief that the designated leader was in charge and that they were not valuable contributors.

Even 2 years after the training, research subjects were integrating learned skills into their meetings, applying facilitation theory, and effectively preparing for meetings. They noted an increased awareness of and appreciation for facilitated meetings, as well as leader and member roles. Research subjects interviewed reported that by using skills learned in the program, their meetings were more efficient, more structured, and more inclusive, as the facilitator role was frequently shared and rotated within the group.

Research subjects reported a change in both facilitator and group member behaviors. The interview data indicates that research subjects set ground rules and used them to intervene in meetings. One comment regarding ground rules concerned "probably the thing that I always do now that I didn't used to always do." Another concerned "also using the whole thing about guidelines and using them as a way to intervene."

They were more intentional about contracting with groups they facilitated and spent more time preparing agendas and attending to meeting flow. One research subject stated "I prepare myself by making sure that first the logistics that we have a room to meet in and a time set and everybody knows all that and then gather agenda items and try to put them in an order that makes sense so that there's a good flow." Interview data suggest that research subjects now saw the facilitator as a neutral guide and were more aware of the importance and impact of that role.

Finally, the qualitative data indicate shifts in beliefs and behaviors related to the role of the group member. As group members, research subjects noted a higher level of engagement and a deeper sense of responsibility for meeting outcomes. A research subject reported "I'm certainly a better listener and am better at assisting whoever is facilitating." Another stated "any meeting I go to now, I feel like I'm a better participant." Several research subjects reported they have a clearer understanding of and appreciation for what they individually bring to a group.

Summary

This study shows that in-depth facilitation training and practice can provide Extension staff with skills needed to:

- Create and sustain an environment of participation in groups;
- Guide groups to appropriate and useful outcomes; and
- Plan appropriate group processes for group work.

Additionally, the research suggests Extension staff received other benefits from participating in the training, including:

- Increased long-term use of facilitation competencies;
- Decreased frustration levels when doing collaborative work;
- Deepening appreciation for the group member role;
- Increased appreciation for facilitated meetings;
- Increased effectiveness and efficiency of meetings; and
- Increased employee engagement and sense of responsibility for group outcomes.

Implications

The results of the research study reported here lead to three important implications. Appropriate facilitation training can: boost self-confidence among leaders and members; more effectively move groups toward positive change; and inspire and sustain collaborative environments.

The study affirms that providing a non-judgmental and safe environment (Mitchell & Cramman, 2003) for practicing facilitating skills can lead to an increased level of self-confidence and a willingness to try newly acquired skills with both external and internal groups. Research subjects who saw the positive impact of using the skills felt empowered to take more risks in groups. Ultimately, the skills became integrated into their natural repertoire of behavior. They were able to facilitate from the designated facilitator role, or group member role, without thinking about it. Individuals with facilitation skills participated in more effective and efficient meetings, whether they were group members or facilitators. Such behaviors translate to working with all kinds of groups.

Facilitation training raises awareness that anyone can learn how to facilitate and be a more effective group member. In the study, there was a shift in assumptions and beliefs about facilitation--the "aha" moment when participants realized that with appropriate skills they could have a positive impact in a group. Training that helps develop facilitation skills and techniques, in facilitator and group member roles, increases long-term staff effectiveness in these roles, with benefits to Extension and the community.

By developing core facilitation skills, Extension staff can be more effective in meeting organizational and community needs and expectations by guiding groups toward positive change. This supports the findings of Rilla et al. (2006), who indicated that staff who graduated from their program as certified facilitators are now able to conduct focused effective meetings. Another study (Haskell & Prichard, 2004) found that well-planned and facilitated meetings with clear group rules and early successes can provide the groundwork for transforming group work.

In times of shrinking dollars, budgets for staff development often get eliminated. Ferrer, Fugate, Perkins, & Easton (2004) highlight the value of face-to-face, capacity-building training where participants can apply what they have learned and receive immediate feedback. This study affirms that internal capacity-building, in the form of facilitation training, is a valuable approach to creating and sustaining a collaborative environment. This concept invites all staff to become engaged citizens both in the community and the organization, leading to better decisions that are owned by all the stakeholders.

Both the quantitative and qualitative data were based on the research subjects' self-assessment and perceptions of their impact. Self-reporting the attainment of facilitation competencies can be viewed as a limitation of the study. Further research could be conducted with groups research subjects are facilitating, or are members of to confirm the results of this study and to discover additional impacts.

The small sample size helped to make this initial research project manageable. Only the program participants who volunteered to be part of the research project were selected. This leaves an area of untapped information. Further study could collect data about why the remaining staff did not include themselves in the study. A larger, randomly selected sample size would provide an opportunity for a more detailed analysis of the findings.

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