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Facilitation and Facilitative Leadership

by MAGALI MENANT, CECILE MAZOURINE and LIU YI

Change is a challenge that organizations are constantly faced with. In an ever more competitive market, teams must become more agile, creative and flexible. Finding ways of working and creating more collaborative and innovative cultures, to cater to such reactivity, is vital for companies.

Fostering Employee Engagement

Attracting and retaining talent remains one of the key challenges that companies operating in China face. In addition, the millennial generation joining the workforce is demanding more alignment with their personal values, such as more freedom and autonomy. Providing for meaning and authenticity is key. How to foster employee engagement keeps managers and HR specialist alike on their toes; at the same time, finding ways to leverage that diversity would be beneficial.

It is recognized that organizations need to adapt their leadership and sometimes their structures. Calling upon new forms of organization that are more open, participative, and agile. How do you deal with such transformations? Facilitation or facilitative leadership is an increasingly useful approach that managers and HR professionals alike need to master and practice.

What is Facilitation?

"The facilitator's job is to support everyone to do their best thinking. To do this, the facilitator encourages full participation,

promotes mutual understanding, and cultivates shared responsibility." - *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*

From the Latin 'Facile,' facilitation literally means making a task easier for someone else. In certain instances, it is referred to as group coaching and it aims at supporting a group in fulfilling a purpose it has set itself, while keeping a framework of rules or group culture it agreed upon. A facilitator helps groups and organizations work more effectively by allowing them to find collaborative solutions and develop joint strategies.

Facilitative leadership refers to the leader's skills, including the practice of active listening, reframing and asking questions to guide his or her team.

In Chinese, facilitation is translated as 引导 (yindao), meaning guiding or leading. The single characters, however, offer a better understanding of what differentiates facilitation from coaching and training. Yin means to attract, extend and involve, while Dao implies leading and transmitting.

Such a methodology helps groups leverage the diversity of individual views that enables them to achieve better results. Hence it is akin to the art of making people collaborate.

Facilitation has been employed in organizational development processes since the 1980s. In essence, the methodology is nothing new: Traditional societies used such processes for community building. In

ancient China, a "Cunzhang," the village head, organized and facilitated meetings with villagers to discuss important issues in their community to reach agreements and make decisions through this collective approach.

What are the Possible Applications?

Facilitation can be used at the project, organization and community level, addressing various needs, from analyzing situations, evaluating the current status, generating new ideas, to decision making.

In an organization, process facilitation suits a variety of instances, for example strategy meetings, innovation workshops and governance meetings. Collaborative approaches are especially helpful when there is a need for whole group involvement or work across departments.

How does Facilitation Work?

Facilitation differs from training in that it is fully process focused, whereas traditional trainings aim to deliver certain content. In facilitation however, the content is generated by the group itself or collective intelligence. Although the facilitator does not provide thematic input, a good understanding of the context, for example the industry and organization background, is still extremely important in order to provide an effective framework and process.

The facilitator is neutral towards the content discussed and the group, which

is important to keep the legitimacy of guiding the process. He or she is meant to hold the space, to create a comfortable atmosphere and to ensure that everyone's voice has been heard. Key facilitation skills include listening, powerful questioning as well as the ability to reformulate and synthesize information. It requires empathy and compassion to provide the right, safe environment for the group.

The facilitator, based on a number of stakeholder interviews during the preparatory time, co-designs the agenda and process of the interaction with the meeting sponsor, in view of the purpose and outputs the groups would like to generate. Processes are not fixed in time, but they can evolve and be adapted towards the given situation in the room. Well known facilitation methodologies include formats such as Open Space, The World Café, Action Learning, Design Thinking, Pro-action Café and many more.

What are the Benefits?

A key question that many organizations face in their change processes is how to foster initiative and ownership among employees, rather than top-down management. Facilitative leadership enables each stakeholder to share their opinions and ideas, participate in the process, giving input and co-creating the final outcome.

The decisions taken and the ideas generated benefit from the collective wisdom of a diverse pool of contributors and all necessary stakeholders. They also benefit from highly engaged stakeholders contrary to a top-down approach. The process helps to build a system with strong ownership of all stakeholders, which is essential for effective implementation of decisions.

It is acknowledged that facilitative methodologies also help stimulating innovation, with formats enabling participants to explore new possibilities and supporting group problem solving.

Furthermore, facilitation helps employees (re)gain work passion. It is a powerful tool to bring out the best in people by creating a safe space to conduct meaningful conversations and promoting engagement. The collective co-designing of employees' own action plans will stimulate their initiative.

Facilitation can also be used in trainings and knowledge transfer in organizations. Instead of learning from experts or books, facilitation helps people to obtain a better understanding through interaction and learn from each other, which is key for creating a learning culture in the organization.

The process of interaction also aims to bring trust and to build stronger ties between the participants: It promotes team building and deep communication among employees. Finding and defining common goals from their discussion will bring them together to work with more committed collaboration.

The value of facilitation compared to traditional project management or negotiation processes is to tap into the swarm intelligence of the group and to create synergy. It enables all voices to express themselves and to co-create, instead of finding the minimum common ground, thus building consensus.

What are the Next Steps?

Beyond the facilitation of meetings and accompanying long-term change initiatives and processes, some organizations strive to fully embrace a facilitative approach by using it in all key steps of internal decision making. Groups build consensus from the bottom-up for the overall company strategy, facilitating the joint vision in small groups and congregating the outcomes in the larger organization. In China, in the tide of fast developing startups, more and more companies are taking such a facilitative methodology and leadership style to build innovative and agile teams.

Hence, companies such as Alibaba train key staff, usually from HR and other supporting functions, to become internal facilitators. Yet, for larger groups and complex issues, which require a neutral stance, external facilitators are invited.

Beyond the organization itself, it is acknowledged that multi-stakeholder collaboration is necessary to address complex challenges such as sustainability and societal problems. The real shift in society can only happen if all sectors join forces. Here again, facilitation has a crucial role to play to enable working together in an effective way, bringing about the solutions needed for tomorrow.

Looking at the benefits of facilitation, ranging from increased commitment and ownership to responsibility and motivation of employees; managers and leaders are increasingly asked to adopt a more facilitative manner. They invite groups of people to make decisions that affect them, rather than having one person make a choice that affects others: Changing from "power over" to "power with." Facilitation is more than a method or a tool; it is a leadership attitude and philosophy.

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CONSTELLATIONS is a Shanghai and Berlin based agency specialized in creating meaningful interactions for better learning, leading and collaborating for sustainable futures. Possible applications are organizational development, multi-stakeholder collaboration and international dialogue. Expertise areas include innovation and entrepreneurship, culture and diversity, sustainability and social responsibility.

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