**Do Facilitators Need to Pay Attention to Contents?**

**By Steven Five, CMF**

Recently, I noticed an article about someone’s understanding of facilitation techniques; the author began the article by saying “the role of a facilitator is different from that of a public speaker or a trainer: a public speaker only cares about contents and pays no attention to processes; while facilitators don’t pay attention to contents, and only pay attention to processes. Facilitators are absolutely neutral in contents and are experts in processes.”

Today, we don’t talk about public speakers or trainers. We just provide some discussions on the remark “Facilitators don’t pay attention to contents, and only pay attention to processes. Facilitators are absolutely neutral in contents and are experts in processes.”.

Well, I have some different opinions about two things in the remark, respectively as follows:

1. “Facilitators don’t pay attention to contents, and only pay attention to processes.”
2. “Facilitators are absolutely neutral in contents.”

For the first thing, I have some different opinions and understandings; for the second thing, concerning “absolutely neutral”, I also have some other opinions and will discuss it in another article.

Let’s just focus on the first one “Facilitators don’t pay attention to contents, and only pay attention to processes.”

Well, I have a different opinion – I believe that facilitators need to pay attention to contents.

**1. Facilitators need to pay attention to contents to assess whether the meeting objective has been achieved.**

We know, as a facilitator, we have the responsibility to facilitate the team to achieve the meeting objective. During the needs analysis and process design phases, the discussion and design are both focusing on the objective and output of the meeting; at the execution phase, the effectiveness of the meeting process is also measured and assessed against the meeting objective, and once the process is found ineffective, prompt adjustment is necessary to help reach the anticipated effect.

If the facilitator doesn’t care about contents, he loses his reference, finds it hard to decide whether the process is effective, and thus cannot evaluate whether the meeting objective is achieved.

**2. Facilitators need to pay attention to contents to measure the quality of the meeting output.**

At every facilitative workshop, customers and participants do care about the quality of the meeting output. In fact, under most circumstances, it is a most significant indicator of whether a facilitative workshop is successful or not.

If the facilitator doesn’t care about contents, how can he tell if the outputs of the meeting and of each phase are good enough, or meet the sponsors’ needs, or reach the predefined standards?

**3. Facilitators need to pay attention to contents to exert control over the meeting.**

During the progress of facilitation, a facilitator always need to pay attention to everything that is happening and prepare for the control on the spot. When the discussion becomes off the topic, or there’s any conflict, delay or forwardness of timing, waste of time, missing of key points, or anything likewise, the facilitator should conduct proper and necessary interference according to the situation, as so to progress the meeting towards the anticipated objective.

If the facilitator doesn’t care about contents, he won’t be able to understand what is happening, whether the discussion keeps on track, which are the key points, and other key messages, and thus won’t exert necessary and proper interference at an appropriate time.

Then such facilitation will reduce to the mere completion of a whole process and lose the functions and effects it should have.

At the same time, as an expert in process management, except for process execution, a facilitator should take constantly creating and safeguarding an open and inclusive participating environment as one of the key duties, which also requires attention on contents.

The above three arguments are the main reasons why I believe facilitators need to pay attention to contents.

I remember when I just started to learn facilitation, I heard of a “legendary story”. In the story, a facilitator went to a strange country to facilitate a workshop and because of the language barrier (perhaps there was no interpreter, or the interpreter was not good enough), the facilitator didn’t at all understand what the participants were talking about, either could he/she understand what the participants had written, but eventually, he/she was able to complete the facilitation.

When I heard this story for the very first time, I felt really amazed. How could that be!?

But then, gradually, when I acquired more and more knowledge about facilitation and collected more and more experiences in facilitation practices, I began to doubt the story. If this facilitator couldn’t listen or read the participants’ language, he/she must have been totally ignorant of what the participants were talking about and their output, then how could he/she decide if each facilitative process was effective? How could he/she evaluate the quality of the output? How could he/she know if the meeting objective was eventually achieved? Of course, the feedback from the participants afterwards would provide some information, but how did the facilitator make those assessment before then?

Not long ago, I consulted with my teacher Janice Lua CMF CPF, co-founder of FNS and coauthor of SPOT on Facilitation, about the question with much curiosity, she smiled and told me that she had also heard of this story. The story seemed to her not quite possible, unless it was during an OST facilitative meeting, and however, in normal facilitative workshops, it’s no doubt that facilitators should pay attention to contents.

In fact, based on my own experience, even in an OST workshop, the facilitator should still pay attention to contents, while the form and approach of such attention may be different from that in normal facilitative workshops.

Besides, even in situations where language barriers do exist, I still believe that it’s necessary for us to understand what participants are talking about as much as possible by means of, for example, applying interpreters. I once went to Hong Kong to facilitate a workshop. At that workshop, I was aware that all the participants were speaking in Mandarin with much difficulty just to ease my understanding and the progress and output of the workshop was hence impacted. I then thanked their thoughtfulness and invited them to discuss still in Cantonese, the language that they were mostly used to; meanwhile, I asked the client to urgently arrange a colleague to act as an interpreter for me. The situation turned much better after the rearrangement. The discussion went quite smooth and I was quite clear about what they were talking about and how the workshop was progressing.

Of course, there’re also situations where the participants talk on their own specialty, which is completely strange to the facilitator, who, as an outsider, cannot understand the key messages of their discussion or the meeting output. The solution that I sorted out was to invite the sponsor to arrange an expert in the related field to support me when assessing the quality of the output, or invite the sponsor to co-facilitate the workshop, for example, to help decide whether the output of each phase was up to anticipation.

A friend of mine once shared with me her feeling after attending an internal facilitative workshop in her company. She told me that during that workshop, she and other participants conducted very serious and sufficient discussions on a specific topic and hence produced a lot of outputs. During their discussion, the facilitator didn’t approach them to see or listen to what they were talking about from beginning to end, either did the facilitator invite them to share the group output after each discussion; the facilitator also didn’t talk about the meaning and value of these outputs. She and other participants were quite at a loss with the situation.

I assumed that perhaps the facilitator she encountered was the kind of facilitator that only cares about processes and doesn’t pay attention to contents.

Michael Doyle, co-founder of Group Facilitation, wrote in his foreword to the first edition of Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making that the power in the role of the facilitator was in becoming “content neutral and a process advocate”. In my eyes, “content neutral” doesn’t mean no attention on contents, but to be neutral in contents: providing no contents, taking no position in topics or results and basically no interference into contents.

In a nutshell, I believe that providing no contents, no interference into contents and being neutral in contents are completely different from “paying no attention to contents”; a true facilitator need to pay attention to contents, very necessary.

If you are interested in the topic or have a different opinion, we welcome you to join the discussion.

Next time we will talk about — whether facilitators should keep absolutely neutral in contents.

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