

Knowing when and how much to steer the ship

By Joellen Killion. (1998). *Journal of Staff Development*, Winter 1998 (Vol. 20, No. 1)

Facilitators are responsible for assisting group members to adhere to their norms and for maintaining a safe, productive environment. To handle these tasks, facilitators need a range of intervention strategies to use when problems occur. This Skill Shop focuses on five intervention strategies, each one increasingly more complex and intrusive in the group's process, and how a facilitator selects an intervention.

Level 1: Do nothing

The first level of intervention is to do nothing. While this might seem like a passive intervention, it is anything but. The facilitator makes a conscious effort not to respond and hopes the group will recognize and resolve its own problem without intervention from the facilitator. Intervening too quickly is a frequent problem of facilitators who want to rescue the group or fix its problems. In most cases, doing nothing allows the group to handle its own situations and empowers the members to learn how to correct difficulties and be responsible for their own actions.

Level 2: Present observations

The next level of intervention is describing what is occurring in the group. In selecting this intervention, the facilitator hopes to raise the group's consciousness of its behaviors or patterns of behaviors.

Phrasing a description is delicate work. The facilitator uses descriptive, factual language that describes actual behaviors without finding fault. When intervening at this level, the facilitator must carefully construct the message and consider how it might be received by group members before delivering it.

An example might be:

- I am noticing that three people in the group are talking most of the time. They have talked for 15 minutes.

Presenting the observation is the end of the intervention. For some facilitators it is difficult to leave it there. The facilitator acts as a mirror to help the group see its own actions. The facilitator does not explain why the behavior occurs, offer assistance to change the behavior, or even assume the behavior will change. Bringing the behavior to the group's attention may be the facilitator's only expectation. The group may ignore the information or correct the behavior. If the group seeks assistance from the facilitator, the facilitator can then determine if assistance will be productive.

Level 3: Describe

In a Level 3 intervention, the facilitator describes his or her feelings without projecting those feelings on the group or assuming that group members feel the same. This approach to interventions helps group members understand the impact of their behaviors. Again, this intervention calls for nothing more than describing one's feelings without including strategies to alter the behavior or the expectation that the group will change. The key to this intervention is using clear "I" statements that avoid blame or fault.

An example of this type of intervention is:

- I feel frustrated. As a group, you have identified many of the problems associated with this situation. I wonder if you want to move on to this problem.

Level 4: Ask

A Level 4 intervention is asking for help. The facilitator seeks clarification or assistance from group members regarding either the process or the content.

Several examples of Level 4 interventions are below.

- I am unsure about the focus of your discussion now. You were talking about some of the problems associated with implementing the plan you developed, and now you seem to be talking about the superintendent's preference for a different direction. What caused that change? How are the two related if they are? I missed something and would appreciate someone helping me understand what happened.

Or:

- Help me understand why the group seems sluggish right now. You appear to be reticent to talk.

Group members may not always be able to explain what occurred and may find themselves trying to figure out the answer to the facilitator's call for help.

Level 5: Direct

A Level 5 intervention is perhaps the most intrusive form of intervention since it takes away the group's focus. In this type of intervention, the facilitator determines that the group needs direction or assistance. The facilitator may need to teach a specific strategy or process for the group to use or to structure the interaction to handle the present problem. When a facilitator intervenes at this level, he or she is assuming the group will benefit from some direction since it's unable to deal with its own problem.

Examples of Level 5 interventions:

- There seems to be some dominating of the discussion at the moment. Some group members are having a hard time getting a word in. Let's stop and do a round-robin process to allow each person a chance to offer his or her opinion. Let's start here and go around the table, each person taking one minute to explain what they think about this issue.

Or:

- You seem to be focused on the budget issues and are using those as a blocker for this alternative. Let's consider both the enhancers and the inhibitors for this solution from the perspective of various stakeholders by doing a force field analysis. (The facilitator teaches the force field analysis process to the group and leads the group through it.)

Selecting an intervention

When deciding at what level to intervene, facilitators might consider:

- How well the group has dealt with previous problems;
- How long the group has been together;
- How long the group will be together;
- Members' comfort level with each other; and,
- The type of task the group is engaged in.

A general rule of thumb when selecting an intervention is to start with a less intrusive one and move toward higher levels as needed. In most cases, groups are fully capable of and willing to self-correct, but usually do so more slowly than if the facilitator intervened. What the facilitator needs to weigh is the comfort of individual members, the task and timeline, and the ability and willingness of group members to handle their own problems.

(Information presented in this Skill Shop is a part of Facilitation Skills, a workshop developed by the author and her colleague, Cindy Harrison.)

About the Author

Joellen Killion is project director of NSDC's Results-Based Staff Development for the Middle Grades Initiative. She can be reached at 10931 W. 71st Place, Arvada, CO 80004-1337, (303) 432-0958, fax (303) 432-0959, e-mail: killionj@aol.com.