



**Section III:
Supporting Learning
Activities Through
Effective Facilitation**

Facilitated Learning Activity Checklist

The purpose of this guide is to briefly describe the unique nature of the *facilitated learning* activity in terms of the direction of learning, the dynamics of participant interaction, and the role of the instructional leader. The attached checklist provides an inventory of steps and tasks to be followed by the leader of a facilitated learning activity to ensure optimal participant benefit from the experience.

A *facilitated learning* activity is a structured group experience that takes place within the context of a larger instructional session. In a *facilitated learning* activity, new knowledge or skill is generated as a result of actions or decisions of the group. Group members are expected to take an active role, working collaboratively with one another, directed by a shared goal or purpose. This is in contrast to *instructed learning* in which new knowledge or skill is transferred from an instructor to individual learners. Learners exercise a relatively passive role. When interaction is called for, it is typically between individual learners and the instructor.

Clearly an important difference between instructed and facilitated learning is the shift in the individual learner's role from being a relatively passive to a fully engaged participant in the learning process. However, this does not mean that the role of the instructional leader conversely shifts from being active to passive. It is critical to emphasize that the leader of a facilitated learning activity (hereafter referred to as the "facilitator") remains an important agent in the learning process—merely the nature of the instructional tasks change. These tasks may be divided into three stages:

- Set-up,
- Monitor, and
- Debrief.

Stage I: Setup

In the set-up stage of a facilitated learning activity, the facilitator must clearly define the *purpose*, the *process* and the *product* of the group activity. These three elements of direction address the mechanics of how the activity is intended to work. Instructions regarding these elements must be issued clearly, specifically, and with the full attention of all group members. Because unity of purpose is so important to the effectiveness of the activity, each participant should hear the same instructions at the same time.

A. Describe Activity Purpose. The objectives of setting up the purpose of an activity are to communicate these two points:

- *Significance.* What is the importance of the current learning activity?
- *Context.* What is the relationship between the current learning activity to learnings that have come before?

Facilitated learning activities are designed around the most critical learning objectives of a course. These activities are not intended merely to add variety or provide group diversion. The economics of course design dictate that each activity serve a significant role in the development of a critical skill or knowledge set. In setting up the purpose of the activity, the facilitator must convey this sense of criticality. For the adult learner, this may be effectively stated in terms of "WIFM"—or, "what's in it for me?"

Most activities are designed to be cumulative of previous learnings up to that point in the course. They provide application of most recently introduced subject matter in the context of previous learnings. In describing the purpose of the activity during the set-up stage, the facilitator should summarize this progres-

sion of what has come before. In process terms, these equate to the up-stream and the immediate “inputs” to the current learning task:

- Where we have been. “What we have learned up to this point is that ...”
- Where we are now. “What we have just seen is that ...”

When successfully executed, the activity will serve to consolidate these old and new learnings.

B. Describe Activity Process. The objectives of setting up the process of an activity are to communicate these two points:

- *Procedure.* What are the instrumentalities (tasks and materials) for making the activity happen?
- *Roles.* What individual actions and interactions are necessary to bring the activity to “life?”

Procedurally, a learning activity is typically structured around a suggested approach for transforming some “raw material” using a set of tools. In traversing the decision space of the activity, the group will be guided by suggested steps, rules, or other constraints on group action that serve to provide a balance of structure and realism. This guidance is intended to ensure the likelihood that the group will succeed in its assigned purpose within the allotted time. But, it will not be so prescriptive as to remove the real-world sense of ambiguity that makes the activity challenging and a source of significant learning. The “raw material” of the task is usually a body of information that is descriptive of a set of initial conditions from which the activity will proceed. This may consist of a case study, a dataset, or some other starting scenario. Teams may be provided with supplemental tools to help them accomplish their task. These may range from a computer application (i.e., ChangePro) to a blank flip chart pad.

To advance the activity, group members may be assigned specific functional roles—such as within—group facilitator, scribe, or timekeeper. To enhance the realism of case studies, group members may be asked to assume the identify of certain characters.

C. Describe Activity Product. The final element of direction required in the set-up stage is to define the expected outcome of the activity. This product represents the collective contribution of team members resulting from the group processes that are engaged by the activity. The directions regarding this product must be sufficiently clear to ensure team success but not so explicit as to give away the game or reduce the challenge. Where called for the directions of the facilitator may describe certain attributes of the deliverable(s), the media or form in which they are to be delivered, and some standards for quality or completeness by which the product will be evaluated.

.....

Critical Success Factor

Check for Understanding. Following the issuance of these instructions, it is not enough for the facilitator to just ask for questions. The facilitator must receive positive confirmation that each individual has complete certainty regarding the purpose, process, and expected product(s) before the activity is initiated. This may be accomplished by selecting a participant at the end of the set-up stage for each activity to summarize its purpose, process, and product.

.....

Stage II: Monitor

The monitor stage refers to the role of the facilitator while groups are engaged in performance of their learning activity. As stated earlier, it is important that the facilitator view her/himself as an active agent in the process of group learning, while not being a direct participant. This role consists of the tasks of observation, diagnosis, and (if necessary) appropriate intervention. In the case of certain types of learning activities, such as role plays, there may be an addition of task of

A. Observe Activity. As each team performs, the facilitator has benefit of an outsider's perspective and objectivity. Usually this means the facilitator is able to view group actions and dynamics more clearly than group members themselves.

Observers in such settings seem to have little effect on the situations they observe. Individuals and groups seem to adapt rather quickly to an observer's presence and act as they would usually act. The facilitator need merely take care to be unobtrusive, to convey objectivity and avoid any impression of critical judgment.

By being attentive to some very fundamental attributes of group performance and recording examples with sufficient detail, the facilitator can help groups attain considerable insight into their own experience during the subsequent debrief stage.

1. *Search Behavior.* This is the style used by a group to generate task-relevant information. It is revealed by the:

- Time and degree of effort expended by the group to define an assigned problem and create potential solutions.
- Number or proportion of group members contributing to the search.
- Degree to which available resources were used.

2. *Normative Behavior.* Each group develops an unspoken set of norms by which it exercises influence or control over individual actions and group interactions. These norms are revealed by the degree to which:

- Members feel free to express their ideas
- Members conform to the will of the group

3. *Evaluative Behavior.* This is how the group assigns value to an idea or option. It is revealed by the:

- Range of dimensions or characteristics on which an idea is assessed.
- Time and degree of effort spent assessing and prioritizing each option.
- Number or proportion of group members contributing to the evaluation.

4. *Choice Behavior.* This is how the group goes about achieving closure on an identified set of options. It is revealed by the:

- Degree of group consensus which constitutes "agreement" to a decision.
- Clarity with which a decision is terminated.
- Group sense of accomplishment in reaching its decision.

Each of these behaviors may be displayed across a range of levels and intensities. No "reasonable" level for any one behavior may necessarily be taken as "right" or "wrong." It is primarily the dynamic of these behaviors in *combination* that provide some explanatory power in understanding a group's performance.

Critical Success Factor

Diagnose Activity. As mentioned earlier, the primary objective of the monitor stage is to obtain specific evidence of individual and group behaviors that will be of use to the facilitator during the debrief stage. Should a serious interference to group processes be observed, it may also be necessary for the facilitator to intervene and help the group resume progress in the activity. Both of these purposes require that the facilitator:

- Analyze what has been observed
- Make inferences regarding the meaning of these observations

Among the risks of making inferences from behavioral observations are those of viewer bias and observational drift. These reflect the natural tendencies for a viewer to be influenced by subjective feelings and for the viewer to lose focus on what is being observed over time. The consistency and reliability of observer inferences are considerably enhanced by the use of aids that encourage the observer to view the same performances by each group and base inferences on the same criteria. This is the primary benefit of using a checklist—to incline the observer toward (if not ensure) a consistent focus on common points of performance. The best means we have of testing the reliability of these behavioral observations is to allow facilitator teams to conduct duplicate observations and compare their post hoc findings—as opposed to the practice of “dividing up” teams between observers.

For example, one group may exhibit a high level of normative behaviors (group conformity) allowing it to work very efficiently, but at the expense of relatively low levels of group creativity. However, this same group may exhibit a high level of resource use—allowing it to accumulate many good alternatives from external sources, with a net result of considered options equal to that of a more flexible group which focused on generating its own ideas.

B. Stage Activity. In certain activities, such as role plays, the facilitator will assign (and if called for, perform) individual roles for conducting the learning activity. Specific role descriptions will be provided as part of the instructional leader’s materials for that activity.

C. Intervene (if necessary). It is both the purpose and the power of a facilitated learning activity that the group arrive at its own learnings independent of external mediation. However, there may be instances when it is necessary for the facilitator to interrupt the activity and help the group make some adjustment to its processes by the least invasive means possible. The test for whether such an interruption is required is to ask if, without an intervention, the group has a reasonable chance of either meeting its assigned objective

or otherwise achieving some positive learning. This points to the fact that positive learning does not necessarily mean that the group must achieve all of its assigned task. The litmus test here is whether the group is capable of deriving compensatory insights from its failure to deliver the final product that was specified during the set-up stage.

Reasons for such intervention by the facilitator may include cases in which it is necessary to correct for:

- Serious group failure to understand or follow set-up directions.
- Individual behavior that is disruptive to the progress of group performance.
- Technical “glitches” that impede the progress of group performance.

Some ways in which the facilitator may appropriately intervene to refocus or re-energize a lost or frustrated group is by asking questions that enable the group to:

- Clarify its original problem (for the group that has lost sight of its assigned task).
- Consider additional alternatives (for group that has prematurely converged on a solution).



- Develop new ideas (for the group that has creatively “stalled-out”).
- Expand participation (for groups in which dominant member has forced “resident resignation” on the part of members).

It is the facilitator’s responsibility to manage the activity for the benefit of all group members who are sincerely interested in learning and making a positive contribution. Any individuals who are not interested or who are unable to make such a contribution, to the extent that their behavior inhibits the learning of others, should be confronted by the facilitator. The facilitator is obligated to deal with such individuals with objectivity and respect. The facilitator must also act with honesty and resolve to preserve the rights of the group and protect the investment of the firm in the learning event.

Problems with loss of material or the malfunction of equipment may interrupt or impede the learning activity. In such cases, the instructional leader is certainly at liberty to apply what ever creative solution is most likely to approximate the original learning objective and intent of the learning activity.

Stage III: Debrief

The objectives of the debrief stage are to summarize group learnings, evaluate group performance, and provide a transition to subsequent learning activities.

A. Summarize Experience. The facilitator should elicit conclusions from participants regarding their experience of the activity in terms of individual *learnings* and team *performance*.

Instructions for debriefing key learning points of certain activities may be found in the instructional leader’s materials for that activity. . With the benefit of observational perspective, the facilitator may prompt the generation of significant group insights by the use of strategic, open-ended questions:

What was learned?

What are the Practical Applications of these Learnings?

- How might the learnings gained from experience be generalized to other situations?
- How might a current, “real-world” case(s) benefit from the application of these learnings?

How do these Learnings Expand upon Previous Learnings?

- What is the point of connection between current and previous learnings
- In what ways does the addition of this new knowledge and skill extend individual/group capabilities?

The facilitator should elicit conclusions from participants regarding their own team performance. With the benefit of observational perspective, the facilitator may prompt the generation of significant group insights by the use of strategic, open-ended questions:

What Happened?

- What worked, what didn’t work?
- By what sequence of thought or actions did the group arrive at its final product, solution, or conclusions?

Section III



Why did it Happen?

- What facts or experiences impelled the group in the direction it took?
- What interpersonal events or dynamics influenced the outcome?

What might Have Happened Differently?

- What were reasonable alternatives to the product, conclusion or solution agreed upon by the group?
- What shift(s) in group processes might have impelled the group in alternate direction(s)?

B. Transition to Next Activity. As a conclusion to this activity, the facilitator should describe how current learnings will be expanded or elaborated by subsequent learnings. This will provide point of reference to help ease participant entry to the next activity and help establish cognitive connect between the two.



FACILITATED LEARNING ACTIVITY CHECKLIST

Facilitator: _____ Course Title: _____ Coach: _____ Date: _____

PERFORMANCE CATEGORIES	DESIRABLE PERFORMANCE STANDARDS	ASSESSMENT	COMMENTS
		4 3 2 1	PERFORMANCE GOALS

4 = Strength 3 = Effective 2 = Benefit from Additional Development 1 = Not Observed

Stage I: SET-UP

A. Describe Activity Purpose.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishes significance of the current learning objective. Positions current learning objectives in the context of and in relation to previous learning objectives. 	4 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/>	
B. Describe Activity Process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly presents procedures, tasks and materials required to achieve the purpose of the activity. Assigns and describes the roles to be fulfilled by group members. 	4 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/>	
C. Describe Activity Product.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Defines the expected outcomes of the activity... Describes desired attributes of the deliverables. Provides standards for quality or completeness by which the product will be judged. 	4 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/>	

Stage II: MONITOR

A. Observe Activity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looks for evidence of the search behavior used by groups to generate task relevant information. Looks for evidence of group norms that exert significant influence or control over individual action and/or group interaction. Looks for evidence of how the group assigns value to an idea or option. Looks for evidence of how the group reaches decision and selects a preferred solution. Evaluates the relationship between observed group behaviors, the effectiveness of group processes, and the likelihood of relevant group learnings with successful outcomes. 	4 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/>	
B. Stage Activity (role plays).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assigns (and if called for, performs) roles in learning activity. 	4 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/>	
C. Intervene (if necessary).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appropriately selects situations in which facilitator intervention will preserve the progress and effectiveness of group processes. 	4 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/>	

Stage III: DEBRIEF

A. Summarize Experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elicits from participants a summary of key learnings from the activity. Elicits from participants an assessment of group performance in relation to the learning objectives and expected outcomes established at outset of the activity. Guides the group toward insights through open-ended questions. 	4 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/>	
B. Transition to Next Activity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positions learnings of present activity in relation to subsequent activities. 	4 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/>	