

Dynamic Workshops versus Traditional Workshops

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[view this page on-line at the above link to see Facilitated Workshop photographs]

Challenge: Imagine spending one to three days in a project meeting. What could we have done better? How could we change the perception that this meeting was a place where minutes were kept and hours were wasted?

Workshops designed and led by a trained, neutral facilitator offer significant improvements over those run without one. From our perspective, the role of a facilitator may cover many areas, including the following:

- helping a meeting owner define an issue or problem
- helping to identify and recruit participants
- understanding all stakeholder concerns
- understanding the organizational environment and political climate
- understanding previous attempts to resolve the issue
- designing an environment to address stakeholder and organizational issues
- helping to define deliverable work products
- designing process for a team to produce the work products
- leading a team through a process without directing or influencing content

Computer Support for Dynamic Workshops

While it is possible to achieve many successes with facilitators, there is growing evidence and experience that facilitators who are able to integrate group management techniques with computer based tools can help groups reach even higher levels of performance. Technology support can also significantly enhance facilitator performance. By shifting many of the clerical and mechanical tasks of information management to the tool, a facilitator can spend more time focusing on the dynamics of the group interaction and management of the process.

A typical computer supported workshop will consist of between five (5) and forty (40) participants in a face-to-face setting with each participant using a notebook computer as meeting workspace - i.e. to enter their comments and/or to submit their votes. We have also developed techniques where groups of between two (2) and ten (10) participants share a single computer (workspace), expanding the capability to facilitate and support hundreds of participants in events such as town meetings, conferences and large briefings. The learning curve for using the computers is less than five (minutes). Activities are paced to allow all participants time to contribute, regardless of their ability to type or their experience with computers.

The "dynamic" Facilitated Workshop differs from the "traditional" Facilitated Workshop in several ways:

Electronic Discussion



In technology supported workshops, participants use notebook computers as "workspace" to build and/or comment on a list of issues, to brainstorm new ideas, to raise questions and record responses, to classify issues into categories, to build outlines and/or models, and to submit assessments and evaluations of selected groups of ideas. All input is recorded interactively and displayed on all participants' workspaces so that no one's input is overlooked or lost. Because participants may all "speak" at the

same time, groups have the potential to generate extremely rich lists of ideas, concepts and comments in very short time. For example, a group of 10 participants can easily record over 150 ideas or comments on a subject in five (5) minutes.

The input of ideas and comments may be anonymous or the input may be tagged with a semi-anonymous group identifier or with the specific author's name. In certain situations, we have found that anonymity provides tremendous incentive for a group to work in a highly productive mode, while in other situations, we have found that anonymity was not needed.

Participants can read others' responses, consider what is being said, then react to those responses by entering supporting or refuting comments or by posing questions. Participants do not have to hold on to "hot" ideas or comments while someone else is speaking. Our experience has shown time and again that the technology support is an invaluable tool for engaging participants who do not usually speak out during verbal discussions or who are intimidated by peers, supervisors or managers. These electronic discussions level the playing field and provide "political amnesty" for all ideas.

Verbal Discussion



No facilitated workshop is complete without verbal conversations, where participants discuss, clarify, analyze and evaluate the issues raised in the electronic discussion. The purpose of many of the computer supported activities is to frame or stimulate these verbal discussions. What participants learn from each other and contribute to both types of discussion transforms the information into knowledge. Of course, during verbal discussions, the traditional ground rules of facilitated sessions (such as: one speaker at a time, don't interrupt, speaker time limits, etc.) would apply.

Information Management

The computer system records and saves all information entered by the participants - in their own words. Summarized raw data of electronic discussions are available in soft or hard copy form immediately at the end of an activity or a session. The technology relieves the facilitator from the clerical tasks of scribing on flip charts or recording and calculating voting results. All electronically recorded proceedings become part of the "group memory".

Concerns

It is natural for new customers and prospects, who haven't experienced this before, to express concerns about using computers in collaborative workshops. In over 11 years of facilitating workshops and moderating focus groups and with computer support, we have yet to encounter any issue that could not be controlled or managed by the session facilitator or moderator.

Some common concerns and our responses to them include:

CONCERN	WHAT WE LEARNED
Those who cannot type well are at a disadvantage	Sessions are designed to include time for "hunt & peck" typists
Those who do not have computer skills are at a disadvantage	The learning curve for the computers is under 5 minutes
The use of computers distracts people away from the task	The use of computers helps keep participants on task
The use of computers discourages people from talking	Electronic discussions help focus verbal discussions on the real issues
The use of computers will generate too much information	Traditional sessions often do not have time to get enough information

Benefit/Value



Why conduct Facilitated Workshops, using computers, in this non-traditional way? Please keep in mind that using computers does not mean that there is no discussion. It means that there are both "electronic" and verbal discussions. During "electronic" conversations there are some very good things going on that lay a solid foundation for and give direction and focus to subsequent verbal discussions.

FEATURE	BENEFIT	VALUE
Responses can be displayed on everyone's computer	Responses that often go in one ear and out the other are not lost	"Seeing" responses often triggers more critical thinking which, in turn, helps generate more thoughtful responses.
Computers allow everyone to "talk" at once	Participants can respond as little or as much as they want without interrupting each other	Participants don't have to sit on (and possibly forget) a "hot" idea while someone else is talking
Each participant has their own computer	Participants can put things in their own words	Responses are not filtered or translated into someone else's words
Responses captured electronically	All Responses are "remembered"	Electronic comments are <u>immediately</u> available for review in paper or electronic form and don't have to be transcribed from tape later
Responses can be recorded anonymously	Participants do not have to identify themselves as the "author" of or take the "heat" for an unpopular or unexpected response	Anonymity provides political amnesty for creative and/or off-the-wall ideas, and provides a safe environment for controversy and disagreement, so there's less worry about feeling "foolish" or saying something "wrong"
Equal access to discussions	More equitable participation by entire group	Anonymity draws out low-level participants who do not speak out or who speak less, while allowing others to participate at their own level
Parallel (simultaneous) processing	More efficient use of group's time	Groups can generate an incredible number of responses in a very short time
Ideas and concepts can be evaluated	Ideas can be shifted to evaluation tools where participants can rate, rank, select and/or prioritize concepts	Evaluation results are <u>immediately</u> available for review in paper or electronic form
Ideas archived (remembered) for future use	Group memory provides an "audit trail" of what is happening during the workshop	Groups can recognize much sooner when they are in "violent agreement"

Some Principles for Integrating Computer Supported Facilitation into a Process

Mapping the activities of any process to computer based tools can prove to be a challenge as well as a learning experience.

Some principles that have helped us in prior engagements have included:

The automation of an activity should not be done simply for its own sake
The automation of a manual activity may or may not add value to a process
For activities under consideration for automation, the objectives of such activities would need to be understood within the context of the process as a whole
One way of automating an activity might be to eliminate it, if its functions were being performed elsewhere or were no longer required
Some forms of measurement of productivity (metrics) such as cycle time, cost and quality would need to be identified, collected and archived in order to demonstrate the value of automation for future process improvements and for future applications of computer support
Many of the most practical suggestions for automation would come from the current and/or past participants in a process
The computer based tools selected should be easy for the participants to use within the framework of the activity
The computer based tools selected should be easy for the participants to relate to the work being performed
Computer support should be used to stimulate the verbal and electronic conversations needed to promote participants' understanding of the issues
Computer support should be used to help participants transform themselves from individuals in a group to members of a team
Computer support should be used to help teams understand and develop consensus based decisions, with or without the use of technology
The facilitator should be cautious in challenging the owner or creator of a process about whether to integrate or how to integrate said process with computer support
That suggestions and recommendations by the participants of a process may be more effective than the facilitator's experience in challenging the owner or creator of a process on whether to integrate or how to integrate said process with computer support

For additional information and to find out how Jordan-Webb can assist you in conducting "Dynamic Facilitated Workshops", contact Paul Collins at (773)-463-2288, pcollins@jordan-webb.net - <http://www.jordan-webb.net>