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The Art of Facilitation

A Crucial Competency for Inclusive Collaboration

By Personnel Management Team

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This blog explores the often-overlooked competency of facilitation for inclusive collaboration. Through project experiences in Odisha and Bodoland, it highlights how facilitation uncovers diverse perspectives and drives successful outcomes. By synthesizing expert insights and offering practical guidelines, it positions facilitation as an essential leadership competency for navigating complex work ecosystems.

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When I first joined the Personnel Management (PM) team at CEGIS, I assumed success at the workplace hinged primarily on technical expertise and analytical competencies: think decision-making, strategic thinking, or conflict resolution. Facilitation as a crucial competency rarely came to mind - even though it is a competency we practise unconsciously through our daily interactions in meetings, discussions, or workshops. It was when I facilitated a focus-group discussion (FGD) with Community Organisers in Odisha, that I witnessed the transformative impact of facilitation. It created an environment where everyone's voice was heard, perspectives were shared, and complex issues were unpacked. The experience reshaped my understanding of facilitation, revealing its potential as a key competency in driving successful projects and cultivating a collaborative culture. So, what is facilitation? Ryann Hoffman, a leading expert on strategy and facilitation, defines facilitation as –



An individual taking responsibility for supporting a group doing collaborative work, who focuses on processes (like activities, agendas, and outcomes) and interpersonal dynamics (like communication and balancing voices heard), so the group can dedicate more brain and emotional space to doing their best work.¹



DIVERSITY IN
COLLABORATION



ACTIVE
LISTENING



BE THE GUIDE,
NOT THE HERO



The Art of Facilitation



PRACTISING
AGILITY



TIME
MANAGEMENT



Facilitators work across various contexts, synthesising group discussions, managing power imbalances, guiding complex problem-solving processes, and leading team-building exercises. At the PM team, facilitation is integral to how we work with central and state governments. Facilitation helps clarify goals, align vision, and prioritise actions while improving processes in information sharing, decision-making, and solutioning.

DIVERSITY IN COLLABORATION

We have worked across projects with a diverse range of public officials, from Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) and Accredited Social Health Workers (ASHAs) in Kokrajhar, Bodoland, to Engineers and Executive Officers in Puri, Odisha. Each official brings a unique lens to discussions shaped by their everyday realities, community needs, and resource access. The diversity doesn't end there: from senior-level Joint Secretaries to mid-level Patents and Trademarks Officers across West Bengal, New Delhi, and Assam - each voice adds a different hue to discussions, enriching them with perspectives that might otherwise be unheard. As facilitators, we have our task cut out for ourselves - how do we embrace this diversity, customise our approaches, and unlock the full potential of these discussions when engaging with officials across various levels and states?

When I first encountered facilitation, I imagined it as simply hosting workshops or running meetings armed with sticky notes, markers, and flip charts. Working with the PM team, however, revealed that facilitation goes far beyond those tools - it's about weaving people, frameworks, and spaces together to achieve intended outcomes in an organisation. Today, with workplaces navigating technological, economic, and logistical challenges, collaboration has become the cornerstone of progress. Partnership models are being prioritised. For example, our engagement with the Housing and Urban Development Department in Odisha demonstrates how alignment and synergy are critical to success. Human-centered interactions emerges as the glue that holds collaboration together, and to lead better, facilitation becomes a key competency. Facilitation is not a one-size-fits-all process: it requires tailoring to the diverse contexts in which CEGIS operates. But what makes a good facilitator?

BE THE GUIDE, NOT THE HERO

The facilitator's role is to help guide participants through the process together, and not assume a position of wisdom and authority. To get clear insights, the facilitator must be tuned into the participants' needs, observe the group, and let them be in the driving seat. By doing this, facilitators can empower participants with the opportunity to develop their ideas, rather than prompting or overpowering them. In a nutshell, a good facilitator shouldn't have all the answers or feel the need to talk the entire time.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Think about the last time you felt you were heard by someone. Now, think about a time when you felt you weren't being heard. There is a difference between being listened to and being heard: this is where active listening comes in. Active listening is one of the most important skills a facilitator must possess in their toolkit. It is instrumental in creating an environment where participants feel heard, respected, and valued. By actively listening to participants' perspectives and needs, facilitators can build rapport, trust, and openness. Leaning into non-verbal and verbal cues such as nodding, maintaining eye contact, and smiling are good ways to actively listen. Other powerful tools include asking open-ended questions rather than yes/no questions and paraphrasing what a participant just spoke about: it shows that their voices are genuinely acknowledged.

TIME MANAGEMENT

We have all been guilty of this - whether it's an FGD, a meeting, a training session, or a workshop, when these extend beyond a time, people start losing interest. To ensure discussions are moving at the right pace and participants stay focused, effective time management becomes crucial. Time management keeps the momentum going, and ensures participants are not fatigued. To tackle the fatigue issue, it is also important for facilitators to keep the room energised at all times and get participants back to a productive mindset. This can be done by introducing short physical activities or even following a quick dance tutorial!

PRACTISING AGILITY

Planning ahead and having plans A, B, and C in place is essential to be ready for any situation. If an activity is spiralling out of control, how do you handle it? If your tech set-up goes haywire, how do you proceed? There are many ways an FGD can go wrong through factors beyond your control. The way to handle it is by practising agility, planning for each possible scenario and being willing to adapt.

WHY FACILITATION MATTERS

As CEGIS expands its footprints across states, sectors, and position holders, projects grow in complexity, making facilitation more crucial than ever. Good facilitation skills are the foundation of inclusive collaboration, enabling diverse teams, states, and personnel to align, communicate, and co-create effectively. At the end of the blog, if you're still wondering: What's in it for me? Why should I care about building facilitation skills? It's because facilitation is leadership.

Gone are the days when facilitators were just associated with sticky notes, flip boards, timers, and chart paper (which are still excellent vehicles for facilitation!). Good facilitators are good leaders. Ingrid Bens, one of the recognised authorities on facilitation, writes,



As more work is performed by knowledge workers in matrixed structures supported by technology, facilitative leadership is emerging as the most effective style for creating and sustaining high-performing teams.²



Good facilitation skills are also valuable because they offer leaders an array of techniques that enable them to improve productivity, define problems in the face of uncertainties, and align and achieve organisational objectives. Facilitators can also enhance collaborative efforts between departments and teams, build consensus, manage conflict, and support overall learning and development.³

Bens explains that when leaders understand how to use processes, they can provide colleagues with clear process steps to self-problem solve. This not only increases staff autonomy, but it also helps them build their capacity to make decisions. In an increasingly fragmented world that calls for more inclusion and equity, today's leaders must be effective facilitators.

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1. [Hoffman, Ryann, "The 4 meaningful levels of facilitation," Mural, February 15, 2021](#)
 2. [Shonk, Kate, "What is Facilitative Leadership?," Program on Negotiation, Harvard Law School](#)
 3. ["The Benefit of Facilitation Skills," AMPG International](#)



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