

The Complete Guide to Facilitation: Enabling Groups to Succeed

*by Tom Justice and David Jamison
(HRD Press, Amherst, MA, 1998)*

*Book Review by Lynda Lieberman Baker
MeetingSolution, Box 4062, Austin, TX 78765 lbaker@meetingsolution.com*

Published by the International Association of Facilitators

**In
Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal
Issue No. 2, Winter 2000**

Scenario 1

Imagine you are faced with a challenging meeting in which you and your meeting sponsor anticipate conflict and disagreement. You wonder how will you design an agenda to accommodate and address these anticipated challenges?

Scenario 2

You are in a planning session with a client preparing for an upcoming team meeting. The client suggest using a decision making process he's heard of but doesn't know much about. Was it force field analysis, nominal group technique or gauging gradients of agreement? You can identify with the client. You've heard of the same processes but know little about them. You wonder how you can you quickly find out if this process is appropriate for the challenge at hand? You ask yourself, how can I learn how to effectively facilitate these processes?

Scenario 3

You are new to facilitation and haven't a clue where to start? You are to meet with a representative of the client group in the morning and need to know what questions to ask in order to prepare for the planning meeting next week. You wonder how will you draft their agenda? What is required in a contract with them for the work you are about to undertake? Plus they asked you for a supplies list and room layout. You're lost.

There are certainly a number of resources for the searching facilitator to use to answer the questions raised in each of these scenarios. The library, the Internet, training courses and trusted colleagues all offer a wealth of information and support. The recently published book, The Complete Guide to Facilitation, is a one stop shop which addresses those questions and plenty more. In fact, it also includes training courses, web-sites, a hefty bibliography and professional associations.

How Complete Is It?

Fortunately for the practice of facilitation, there are a growing number resources available to support new as well as experienced facilitators in successfully performing their jobs. This particular volume will certainly distinguished itself on many bookshelves as the complete guide it purports to be, with a few forgivable exceptions. It does a good job of reviewing the field of processes, tools and techniques for facilitators to use in a wide variety of situations. It is well written and is graphically user friendly. It is straightforward in both style and content.

While the 674-page binder is chock full of tools and techniques it also provides substantive context as a foundation for the recommended procedures. For example, the introduction provides primers on understanding adult learning, group dynamics, decision-making and process consultation. There is also sufficient information in each of the section overviews and presented as guides throughout each of the five sections.

What's Included?

The first 500 plus pages cover the preparation, working with the group and follow-up stages of meeting facilitation. The Preparation section include tips on how to get to know the group and context, organizing the group and setting group norms and keys to planning meetings. The next section, Working With The Group, includes the range of procedures and guidelines for getting started, establishing group memory systems and building group data bases, making and analyzing decisions, handling conflicts and common problems with groups and evaluation and closure. Next, the Follow-up section is covered through samples and guides for meeting records, reviewing recommendations and implementing planning.

The two remaining sections, Special Meetings and Facilitating with Technology, along with the appendices (facilitation equipment and tools, a buyers guide to flipcharts, associations, web sites, training and a hefty bibliography) supplement the foundation with additional information to make the guide more complete.

The resources that make the guide a veritable handbook are approximately 100 guides and procedures that make up most of this book's contents. The guides give summaries on a wide range of specific topics like flip chart tips and tricks, encouraging participation in a meeting and alternatives to giving out information during a meeting. The procedures are step-by-step instructions, such as: how to thoroughly plan for an important meeting, how to moderate a focus group or negotiate group member roles in a conflict situation.

References are less than Perfect, But Not Far

There are ample references to establish a context for the procedures or guides and also enable the reader to get more information if needed. What's most impressive is that the authors' demonstrate experience and skill, as well as substantial reference to colleagues work in this field. Justice and Jamison are generous in describing and referencing a wide range of their colleagues' work, such as Open Space, Future Search and Dialogue. With a few exceptions, the authors have provided a comprehensive overview of the field. Included in the guide are generous references throughout and a fairly comprehensive bibliography with 120 books and a number of training courses at the end.

It seemed odd that Laura Spencer's book, Winning Through Participation, or any other book documenting the work of the Institute of Cultural Affairs Technology of Participation did not make it into these pages. (ICA's work has had significant impact

in the facilitation field, not the least of which was the founding of the International Association of Facilitators.) It seemed to be a noteworthy omission in a volume referred to as a complete guide.

Utility for Various Experience Levels

The volume is appropriate for both new and experienced facilitators, in a variety of circumstances and in a number of different ways. First, the authors make suggestions on how to read the book depending on one's level of experience. Next, the loose-leaf binder format makes it simple to remove pages as needed and duplicate forms for immediate use. To make it even more accessible, many of the procedures and samples described in the book can be customized using the copies provided on a CD-ROM included with the book. While its utility as an easy-access reference source is slightly inhibited by the absence of an index in the back and topic tabs throughout, with a little effort, one can find just about anything needed.

Necessary But Not Sufficient

With as many accolades as this review provides, one might get the impression that this book is a 'facilitator in a box' solution to all that ails any group - not exactly. Although it is a comprehensive review of our field, words of caution must be included. Like any professional skill, facilitation requires not only knowledge, but experience, insight and skill. While The Complete Guide may provide many of the necessary tools and techniques to enable a facilitator to succeed it must be complemented with appropriate skill, attitude and experience. Additional reading, training and self-reflection should not be abandoned once this complete guide is read and on one's library bookshelf as a trusted reference guide.

Reliable, Reassuring and Worth The Investment

The Guide has become a handy reference and resource for this reviewer. The checklists for planning offered good tips to remember in contracting with one client. The SWOT analysis description offered a succinct overview of that process with another strategic planning client. The guidelines for recorders have been useful training tools for neophyte recorders.

While that price tag of \$125 may be a bit hefty for a casual book purchase, if one is building a facilitator's library, this book is a wise investment. The scope and breadth of the facilitation field, which the authors cover, is quite impressive. Internal and external facilitators, new and experienced professionals and those facilitating full or part time, would all be well prepared to tackle a wide variety of facilitation challenges with this guide book as a key resource.
