

Facilitating Community Development

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The purpose of the field of community facilitation is to create an autonomous community development process that is enhanced by methods and technologies, such as Operational Research, Systems Sciences and Information and Communication Technologies.

The academic world often focuses on methods and technologies instead of on the context in which they are used. But methods and technologies cannot initiate or create an organisational change process on their own. They can only support a process that already exists between stakeholders. Methods and technologies are tools; it takes people with spirit to make them work.

The facilitator

The person or agent supporting this change process is usually called facilitator, animator, catalyst or mediator. These different names express the different roles this actor is playing in the change process. In what follows we will call this agent of change *a facilitator*. The role of the facilitator is manifold and subtle, but nevertheless significant. During initial discussions, the facilitator attempts to draw out community members – to encourage full expression of ideas and opinions without imposing his agenda. If community statements are recorded, if he is the interviewer, he agrees on the parameters set by the community spokesperson and avoids asking leading questions. He acts as a resource providing information to the community about whatever decision making processes are relevant, making them aware of sources of power and points of influence.

Most importantly, the facilitator strives to bolster the self-confidence of the community by focusing on its competencies instead of how his expertise is going to compensate for what is lacking in the community. The person assisting the community is a “social inventor” rather than an “interventionist”.

After more than three decades of working as a practitioner, teacher and researcher in community facilitation, I have developed some general principles that I use to provide a theoretical framework to my work.

Community facilitation

The focus of community facilitation is on organising and mobilising the competencies of the community members with the purpose of enabling them to act on their own behalf. It promotes the development of decision making skills along with the necessary changes of attitude that make the community better able to use those skills (learning). Community facilitation focuses on the process of change, on organising

and mobilising the competencies of people, instead of the resolution of an issue as an end in self.

Most professional consultants focus on the short-term resolution of specific problems or issues. Once the problem is corrected through the institution of a programme or successful political action, they have done their job. While specific programmes may result from the co-operative efforts of the facilitator and the community, they are not seeing as ends in themselves – only the means to an end. The end or goal is for people to gain a sense of their own collective strength. The experience of developing the power of the group and exercising that power is the ultimate product of the community facilitation process (empowerment). The process itself is the “product”. There may be a need for outside assistance, but it will be a collaborative rather than an expert-client relationship.

From the very beginning of the social facilitation process, the facilitator makes a formal commitment to be accountable to the community during each stage of the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. He agrees that it is the community (not himself, or employer, or decision makers) that will identify priorities, determine solutions, and establish time frames. This will be enacted through open-ended community spokespersons, and individual and community editing rights. Because the facilitator’s commitment is spelled out so clearly, any attempt to manipulate the community or impose an agenda will be more easily recognised. He will lose credibility at a more profound level than would a consultant who never made such promises.

The accountability of the local leaders is established and maintained by the democratic selection of community “opinion leaders” and by community review and approval of the “opinion leaders” statements. These mechanisms prevent leaders from getting too far ahead of the general community or straying too far from the initial community position.

The process respects people and responsible decision makers by giving both parties the opportunity to present their views in a direct manner, without the distortion that often results from the use of an intermediary, a consultant. The community facilitation process is founded on a respect for the potential of people and decision makers that avoids the convenient stereotypes. Giving people the opportunity to communicate directly with decision makers conveys a strong belief in their ability to express themselves, to listen and understand the decision maker’s point of view, to differentiate between the responsible decision maker and the manipulative decision maker, and to respond accordingly.

For decision makers, direct communication with their constituents humanises the sometimes abstract issues, provides a richer and more complex picture of people opinions, encourages accountability, and offers a mechanism for unencumbered expression of their viewpoints. It acknowledges their potential for responsible action, rather than assuming they will automatically greet people input with hostility. It would be naïve and presumptuous to imply that direct communication between people and decision makers will always lead to positive change. It does, however, make both parties less vulnerable to distorted interpretations and provide the best opportunity for mutual understanding (communication).

Encouraging a sense of collective power

Communities seeking outside support are usually all too aware of the unequal relationship between themselves and government decision makers. They realise that the decision maker's access to the elements of power – information, organisation, and resources – is much greater than their own. This knowledge frequently results in a debilitating sense of powerlessness and frustration, which inhibits effective action.

Without denying the inequalities of the situation, the community facilitation process helps communities to discover their own sources of power by giving them the experience of exercising control over the facilitation process itself. Exercising collective power within the community through a series of progressive stages, beginning with the process of transcending factions, established priorities, and selecting opinion leaders, builds the self-confidence necessary for the community eventually to act outside itself.

When the community moves to the stage of proposing solutions, it identifies and exerts control over the local elements of power. Previously unrecognised sources of information within the community are acknowledged and utilised. The community learns that its existing organisational structures – be they families, clans, or interest groups – can serve as the foundation for co-operative efforts. The community identifies local resources in the form of funds, individual skills, or materials, and determines how these can be applied to the problem at hand. The entire process provides a visible and unambiguous experience of collective power that transcends the inequalities or limitations of individual community members.

Methods and technologies, when sensitively used, enhance the feeling of collective power. The community has not only access to them, but more important, it controls the methods and technologies as well as the professionals associate with them. For example, the experience of learning to use and control information and communication technologies in practical problem solving empower the community's capability to deal with the extern world.

Building coalitions with other communities

A successful community organisation always begins at the local level, with the needs and problems an individual community has identified. Even when an issue has broad regional or national implications, the facilitator must proceed slowly and cautiously, allowing the initial community to develop a clear focus on the problems and potential solution and avoiding the temptation of overwhelming the community with his global insights. A significant amount of time must be spent in developing the high degree of mutual trust and respect, which underpins the community facilitation process. Any attempt by the facilitator to speed up the process or to introduce someone else's agenda will only result in a dilution of the community's energy and action plans.

This not to say that a community must solve all problems by itself. After the community moves to the action stage, forming coalitions with other communities having similar interests and needs comes naturally and is encouraged – provided that such coalitions are strategically necessary in order to strengthen the community's impact on decision makers and are not merely ends in themselves.

The use of methods and technologies are particularly helpful in the coalition-building stage. When shown to interested communities, the initial community achievement becomes the focus and point of departure for discussion. Each interested community is encouraged to add its views and opinions using these new approaches, thereby increasing the strength of the initial community's statements.

Alliances with decision makers can also work to the community's benefit and are an integral feature of the community facilitation process. Such alliances can take several forms. For example, if local decision makers are responsive but unable to satisfy the needs of the community or coalition, they can form an alliance with the community to influence state and national decision makers. If the local decision makers are uncooperative, the state and national decision makers can be approached directly by the community, and together they can exert pressure on the local officials.

This approach fosters the development of community-initiated solutions, not just descriptions of problems or complaints, thus providing mature and constructive information to respond to. By generating its own solutions to problems, the community derives several benefits. It enhances its credibility in the eyes of decision makers who have neither the time nor the energy to come up with creative solutions to all of the problems they are confronted with. The chances of obtaining an acceptable plan of action are increased since many bad programmes result from lack of knowledge of the local situation, rather than malicious intent.

Finally, the community is better equipped to enter into process of negotiation and compromise on which governmental agencies are founded. By taking the time to consider a variety of solutions, community members learn to appreciate the complexities of problem solving that decision makers must deal with and thus are less likely to take an all-or-nothing stance.

The community facilitation process acknowledges the many layers and forms of leadership existing in the community. While it strives to allow the opinion leaders to emerge, it does not ignore or circumvent the formal leaders, such as council members, mayors, etc. The formal leaders, whether or not they are also opinion leaders, have numerous levers of power that can be used for or against the facilitation process.

For this reason, the community facilitator must thoroughly explain the open-ended nature of the process to the formal leaders and obtain their approval. Once they have understood the process, they are less likely to be threatened by the emergence of opinion leadership and will be less likely to interfere when events move beyond them. One can assume that they will try to control the process initially, but having agreed to the terms of community consensus, they can pursue their own agenda only at great expenses to their political status. Faced with a difference of opinion over community priorities, they will usually succumb to popular consensus and seek to maintain their power by taking credit for introducing the process to the community.

The role of professional experts

When professional experts are called into a community, the relationship is frequently one-sided. The expert defines the problem according to the narrow limits of his particular discipline and proposes solutions that utilise the tools he is familiar with. The engineer sees bridges to be built, the doctor diseases to be cured, the agricultural

expert new crops to be introduced, and so on. If citizen input is sought, it is usually obtained on the expert's terms and is of secondary importance to the expert's opinion.

The community facilitation process recognises the important contribution that professional experts can make to the solution of community problems, but it allows for the contribution to be made within the framework of a collaborative relationship between community and expert. Instead of the expert driving the system, the community to meet its self-defined needs uses his expertise. For this reason, experts are not brought in until the community has had time to work out its own definition of the problem and to discuss possible solutions.

The community decides if it requires specialised assistance and how that assistance will be used. Discussions with the expert may result in a redefinition of problems and may generate additional solutions, but these adjustments will be made within the larger context provided by the community facilitation process – looking at the community as a whole instead of viewing it as a series of discrete problems.

A collaborative relationship between community and expert requires alterations in typical patterns of behaviour. The expert must spend more time in a community and be willing to open himself up to the give and take of a dialogue between equals. He does not need to denigrate his expertise in order to obtain acceptance by the community. Nor is he required to forfeit the attainment of professional objectives. For example, a participatory action researcher can still have his research published, but he alters the way in which the research is conducted.

Community members have to assume a more active role instead of relying on the expert to produce a magical cure. They must acknowledge and articulate their own competencies and give equal recognition to the expert's specialised knowledge. The facilitator's responsibility is to provide a forum that will allow such an exchange to take place.

Final remarks

The flexible nature of the community facilitation approach lends itself to a variety of applications – as an alternative to the public hearing process, participatory research, organisational development, conflict resolution, urban-rural development, and development communication. While this approach can be learned, it is not an ideology or technique that can be memorised and then applied universally in a series of rigidly defined steps. It is not a formula. It is a process, in time, to be used in an open-ended and responsive manner according to the requirements of varying circumstances. Adaptation and evolution are inherent to the community facilitation approach and remain key determinants of its success.

References

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