

When to Use an Outside Facilitator – A List of Possibilities

- Our organization recently hired a consultant to come in and work with senior managers for two days on “What’s My Communication Style?” She facilitated workshops in order for us to help understand our communication styles and the styles of the other senior managers we work with every day.
 - It was important to bring a trained professional in for these workshops because it was imperative that we understand the strengths and potential trouble spots of each of the four communication styles in order for us to better communicate with each other. Even though the senior leadership team had worked together for some time, the new executive director could see some communication difficulty and felt these workshops would give us the tools to understand one another. It worked.
- I would seek the services of an outside facilitator if the group was dealing with a controversial or “sticky” issue. A 3rd party facilitator would have a much easier time remaining neutral in a situation like this, which would help the process go more smoothly and create a more trusting and collegial atmosphere.
- I have seen facilitators brought in to lead annual retreats and do strategic planning—issues that often stir emotions and strong opinions—with great success.
- I might consider hiring an outside facilitator for a noncontroversial issue if there was not expertise within the group to facilitate, or if the group has a history of ‘spinning their wheels’ at meetings. This assumes, of course, that money is not a concern.
- Generally, I think outside facilitators are helpful in situations where a challenging or difficult discussion may need to be had amongst co-workers or if the discussion requires a certain “atmosphere”. They’re also valuable when an objective voice is required to move the discussion forward – if there’s a stalemate on an important decision or if people need an objective voice to remove them from their typical point of view that comes with being familiar with one’s work.
- I would advise members of my organization to seek the services of an external facilitator at the start of our strategic planning process to help staff think through where we’ve been and where we are going. This type of discussion requires all staff to be in a similar position and in a safe, trusting space that allows them to share openly and honestly. I also believe the staff that would typically lead this type of discussion should equally participate in the discussion rather than have to focus on facilitating and moving the conversation forward.
- An outside facilitator is appropriate for staff retreats. We tend to organize a retreat for all staff employed at the organization as well as by program area. It would be helpful to have someone who would be able to bring the discussion to the bigger picture and help us think through how our work meets our mission.
- We hold community meetings for various reasons. I believe an external facilitator might be appropriate for the times when we have community meetings around our organization’s strategic plan rather than having our staff facilitate that discussion. I think that would allow people, both staff and not, to share openly and honestly.
- There are occasions where we are asked to step in on community disputes. These may be times when we would want an external facilitator rather than our organization to guide those discussions so we don’t drive the outcome towards to meet some of our goals. There are instances where an objective voice with no knowledge of community history would be helpful.
- When members of the group can’t be neutral enough to facilitate themselves.

- E.g. when trying to solve a complex and/or sensitive problem. This could mean reaching a decision that will have a significant effect on all participating group members such that no one can be impartial.
- When the group does not work well on its own. When the group needs to learn to run smoothly and currently no one in the group is able to facilitate.
- When the facilitator exhibits behaviors that hinder:
 - Oblivious to group needs
 - No follow up on concerns
 - Listens poorly
 - Strays into content
 - Loses track of key ideas
 - Takes poor notes
 - Ignores conflicts
 - Provides no alternatives for structuring the discussion
 - Gets defensive
 - Puts people down
 - No paraphrasing
 - Lets a few people dominate
 - Never asks, “how are we doing?”
 - Tries to be the center of attention
 - Lets the group get side tracked
 - Projects a poor image
 - Uses negative or sarcastic tone
 - Talks too much
 - Doesn’t know when to stop
- An outside facilitator would be needed if there is no internal facilitator that could be unbiased and exhibit behaviors that help.
- If the topic is controversial.
- There are a lot of different, strong topics.
- When it is critical that input from all members of an organization are included-difficult to facilitate and participate all at same time.
- When an unbiased, neutral convener is needed.
- When a new perspective is needed on a situation due to its internal conflict, too close to situation or too much history.

Excerpted and adapted by Jane E. Haskell, Extension Professor, also Julia Beaty, Amelia Bell, Caitlin Cleaver, Jessie Daniels, Stacey Gambrel, Kate Garland, Kristen Grant, Jessica Jansujwicz, Rebecca Neville, Sheila Norman, and Juanita Taylor. Group interview at Strengthening Your Facilitations Skills, Level 1 Training, (Bangor, Maine: University of Maine Cooperative Extension, 2013). Used with permission.

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