

EPISODE 6: 7 STEPS TO BETTER FACILITATION

- [CC] Hello and welcome to episode 6 of Engagement Matters. My name is Christina Canters and today I'm joined by John Williams, consulting extraordinaire, and the founder of JHW Management Training. Today we're talking about facilitation in the workplace and John, I understand you have 7 tips to help us improve the way that we facilitate.

- [JW] Correct.

- [CC] But first, and this is really important, can you share with us why this is important?

- [JW] Facilitation is a fantastic skill and highly valuable in helping us move initiatives forward, getting buy-in, getting the improvement of the staff, getting new fresh ideas. There's a whole lot of things it helps us improve the way we perform our jobs and bring people along with us. And it's highly motivational.

- [CC] Fantastic. I'm sure people listening have seen a lot of facilitation happen or have experienced it a lot, but they may not necessarily be really effective all the time, so can you share why, if it's not done well, what happens?

- [JW] There are consequences. Sometimes we skip some of the rules of facilitation that I'm gonna be talking about later, and when that happens, we can actually end up thinking we've achieved all those things I mentioned earlier, when in actual fact we haven't achieved those things. Maybe we think we've got the buy-in of the people and they feel that they've been heard, when they're all leaving the room, saying, "Hm, hm, this is not going the way I wanted to."

And we might have some passive resistance, we might have had active resistance in the room, we may have all sorts of illusions about how well it actually went compared with the way that the participants saw it went. And we might not realize that there and then, but later down the track during this project or initiative, that can come and bite you really hard when things aren't going quite as singularly as we hoped.

- [CC] It reminds me of that quote that goes, "The biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it's taken place." John, you've got 7 workshop facilitation hints to help us to run better facilitation sessions and to get better buy-in from staff and however it is that you're working with. Can you take us through those? What's number one?

- [JW] Number one, probably the most important, certainly very important and it's worth remembering, the facilitator is independent. This is one of the mistakes that is most often made in the workshop, in that probably the most involved person maybe the manager of the group that has the most at stake or the specialist in that topic that's trying to get everybody on site, they often by default become the facilitator as well. That means they're not independent.

The problem that that leads to is that the facilitator becomes the most influential voice in the discussion as well and in fact can close down other voices that they don't concur with. The great power about facilitation is it's an influencing technique, it's for the participants to know that they've contributed, they've worked through the content, they own the content.

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When in a workshop the manager takes control and shuts some parts of conversation down, or pushes their own barrow, when the specialist in the software, when we're talking about the application, the new software product, when they're guiding the discussion and says things like "No, that's not the way our software works, you won't be able to do that."

This is all closing down the influencing and the empowerment within the workshop, people are switching off and are feeling betrayed by the facilitator. I thought this was a session for us all to openly express our views, but clearly, it's not. Somebody has already decided on the answers, and this is just a mockery and when people leave the room, they're not necessarily going to tell you that they've checked out or that they disagree with all the outcomes or that they may feel strong enough to sabotage the outcomes later.

They're not gonna tell you that and you may well go away with a rosy feeling, but maybe you've set some time-bombs that are gonna go off later down the initiative because with the best of intent, you've just set the thing up inappropriately, and we end up with problems later.

- [CC] What's a manager to do then?

- [JW] If I'm the manager of the group and I'm truly looking for the input of all staff in the discussion about how we might restructure or how the culture should be developing or whatever it might be, then I must not be the facilitator as well. I will take a seat on the floor and be a contributor to the discussion. I want somebody to run the workshop who is accomplished at the skills of facilitation, but has no vested interest in the outcome. It might be somebody from a different department in our organization, it might be somebody from outside.

But they're given the brief to remain independent and give everybody an opportunity to contribute, nothing's off the agenda because we're trying to gather everybody's needs and at that later point we analyze all the ideas and come to a group consensus about the way we go.

If I as a manager already decided how it's gonna be, then I shouldn't try and trick my people into thinking they're making a contribution, I should tell them how it's gonna be and that's a presentation, not a workshop. If we are truly looking for the empowerment and buy-in that facilitation brings, then the most vested or invested people in the discussion should be allowed to contribute from the audience and we get an independent person to lead it. It's the only way to avoid that conflict of interest.

- [CC] And also, if the manager or the boss or whoever is removed from that facilitation role, then the rest of the staff will most likely feel more free and able to express their own opinions without worrying about being shut down based on previous experiences they might have had with that manager as well.

- [JW] Correct. And since we're all sitting on the floor and it is a workshop, we all have permission to challenge the views of the boss because we've just leveled the playing field, that's what facilitation is all about and if you don't do that, you're not truly getting all of the ideas out onto the playing

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surface.

- [CC] Excellent, all right. That's point 1. Hint number 2, and you've got written here, separate the idea generation and information gathering from the analysis. Can you explain this?

- [JW] Yeah, I can. Often within a workshop we have some sort of ideas generation, it might be a brainstorming session. It might be giving everybody the opportunity to put their knowledge on the table, one way or another, that's the good starting point for a workshop, gathering all the knowledge together in one place.

What so often goes wrong with this and we know this from basic brainstorming technique, the rules of brainstorming say we spend a certain amount of time throwing ideas out and quite specifically during that certain amount of time, there is no criticism, no analysis, no discussion, no prioritization.

That all comes later, what we're doing is being creative and just throwing ideas out onto the board and we do it quick-fire and as I throw out ideas that might generate ideas for other people, we just throw them out. All we're trying to do is get the ideas out there, no idea is bad, no idea is good, they just all get on the board.

What so often happens is somebody throws up the first idea and somebody else is, "Oh, no, that's not, we can't do that..." And we start having a discussion about that whole point and we never get any creativity going. We labor over every little point as we go and we might be having analytical discussions that we actually don't need, but we're stifling all the creativity that comes out. And we're alienating everybody in the room that has no interest in that one particular point because they're sting around listening to a discussion for which they have no involvement.

- [CC] Have you experienced that before where you might have been facilitating as an independent facilitator, and then someone puts out an idea and then other people immediately jump on it and start analyzing it, does that happen?

- [JW] It very often happens. On the workshop, we run the facilitation exercise and so frequently, that very thing happens and the workshop never gets finished. They run out of time and they still haven't got ideas up on the board and we've generated a whole lot of discontent in the audience because certain people have no interest in one issue that seem to dominate the whole discussion.

- [CC] And then if they see, "Oh, that person's idea got attacked and dissected and analyzed within an inch of its life." They're gonna think, "I don't think I should put an idea up."

- [JW] "I think I might keep mine quiet." Exactly. So, very, very simple, it's just the standard rules of brainstorming. Let's get the ideas out there unencumbered, rapid fire, get the ideas out there, whether we use post-it notes, whether we use a whiteboard, however we do it, just get the ideas out there quickly, with no discussion, no analysis, no prioritization and once we finish that brainstorming session, then we can start looking at all the ideas up there, start analyzing them, grouping them, finding common themes and so on and so forth and move on in that direction.

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- [CC] But you have to have them as separate parts of the session or even separate sessions maybe.

- [JW] Yes.

- [CC] All right, fantastic. Okay, hint number 3: “Agree the structure and ground rules upfront.”

- [JW] Yup. Again, very simple to do, but very effective when we do it well. One of the ground rules, part of the structure that we’re gonna announce up from is that we’re gonna keep the ideas generation separate from the analysis.

- [CC] Why is it important to do that upfront?

- [JW] So that when people start contravening it, I have the authority to bring them back to what we’ve agreed.

- [CC] You can say “Oh, we’ve already agreed that we wouldn’t do this, guys, stop it.”

- [JW] Yeah. So as part of my introduction to the workshop, I would normally say, “Okay, I’ve got a couple of ground rules. First one is we’re gonna keep analysis and ideas generation separate and the reason we’re gonna do that is bla, bla, bla, is everybody comfortable with that?” Then, when we start brainstorming, if somebody starts getting into analysis,

I have the authority because they agreed it up front, to say, “Okay, can we hold that analysis later, we’ll get on to that later, more ideas, please, keep the ideas coming.” No discussion, no analysis, no criticism. We agreed that up-front.

Similarly with the agenda for today, I, being the independent facilitator in that room do not have any authority. I have not a right to impose upon you the agenda for the day, I do not have the right to tell you to turn off your mobile phone for instance, but I can ask if everybody in the room is prepared to accept this agenda, if everybody is prepared to switch off their mobile phone.

Is everybody in agreement to one voice at a time and please show respect to other people, if people nod and agree to those suggestions from me, the ground rules up-front, then they’ve just given me the authority to enforce that should we all get a little bit excited later in the day or should somebody pick up their mobile phone and start taking calls. We then can say, “Sorry, we did agree up-front that we wouldn’t be doing that.”

- [CC] So it’s a group decision. How do you actually phrase that with your language, ‘cause essentially you are creating these rules, but you are presenting in the way that says, these are some rules that we might want to consider following, are you okay with this, so how do you actually phrase that?

- [JW] I phrase that as a suggestion, I phrase that as a question. We found that if we’re gonna get the best out of this workshop, it’s usually best if we take away the distractions of mobile phones, so is everybody happy to at least put our phones on mute, hey let me do mine first or maybe I’m gonna switch mine off altogether, is everybody happy with that?

- [CC] You’re making it more about the outcome and saying, “Hey, we’ll all get a better result, we’ll

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have a better time, we'll get more done if we do this 'cause we found from our experience..." Rather than saying "I don't want anyone's phones on, everyone turn your phones off."

- [JW] Exactly. You don't have the authority to do it, and people don't like being told, they're gonna rebel. It's not an instruction, it's a request.

- [CC] Fantastic. Any other ground rules that you usually get everyone to agree to, up-front?

- [JW] The structure and the timing and that moves on to hint number 4, I've suggested managing time overtly. Often we see in meetings and presentations as well as workshops, we're worried that we might be running out of time. We get people surreptitiously looking at their watch, we might have appointed a time-keeper who is trying to make funny signals, hand-signals from the back of the room, slitting their throats or pointing at their wrist. This is all surreptitiously, it almost makes people suspicious, why are they doing that?

I would much rather during the ground rules say, "So we're gonna spend 15 minutes on this section, then 20 minutes on that section, then 15 minutes in the end on that section, is everybody happy with that as a structure?" If everybody has nodded and agreed to that, then during the workshop, I have the right to say, "Okay, it's now quarter past 10, we did agree that we'd only spend 15 minutes on this section, so we now need to move over to the analysis." That's managing time overtly.

I am managing time so that my participants get the best bang for the buck of their time not because I've got somewhere else I'd rather be and that's why I think managing time overtly is the best way of doing it.

- [CC] Because also if you then develop that happen of running over time, the next time you run a facilitation, everyone will go, "I don't want to go to John's session because he ran half an hour overtime last time, he's probably gonna do it again."

- [JW] You get that happening, you might not even get that luxury 'cause people might just leave the room before the meeting is completed and that leads me on to the next step which is number 5, agree a plan of action and document it. If we don't get to that step, then the chances are we've wasted the whole session.

- [CC] This is plan of action at the end of the session?

- [JW] Exactly. If we don't manage time overtly, the bit that we're gonna miss out on is we didn't allocate all the actions properly, we didn't agree to the outcomes and so on and often that can mean disaster for the initiative going forward. I'll make the point here; it's the facilitators responsibility to ensure that the actions get documented and so on. It's not their job necessarily to do it.

They might ask for a volunteer from the workshop to say "Who's prepared to document this?" Who's going to agree to X, who's going to agree Y, so the facilitator doesn't have to do everything. There's a whole lot to do here, the facilitator doesn't actually have to do the time-keeping, he might delegate that to one of the other members of the workshop, "Can you give me a nudge at the 15-minute mark and at the 20-minute mark?"

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“Would you, Christina, be prepared to document the section around A or B?” It’s not the facilitator’s job necessarily to do everything, but to ensure that everything that’s essential does get done.

- [CC] So, it’s not the facilitator’s role to document stuff or keep time because their role is to facilitate and help everyone generate those ideas.

- [JW] And outcomes. Let’s get to the end of the process so that we get the outcome that we’re seeking.

- [CC] And also when you have other people within the group involved as well, so you give them a role to play, they’re then I would imagine more invested in the actual workshop and in the outcome because they’re contributing somewhat. They’re not just passively sitting back and listening in or whatever, they’re actually doing something that contributes, they’re involved in it.

Okay, number 6, call an adjournment if things are heading off track.

- [JW] Yeah, I think this is one of the techniques that in certain circles, legal circles, negotiations, it’s certainly not unusual for one party or the other to call an adjournment to the meeting. In general business, it’s not often done, not even often considered. I think when things, when the tide is flowing against you, or when the room is becoming perhaps a little bit too passionate, a bit too overheated, where we’re going off on too many red herrings, it’s gonna stop us achieving the overall outcome.

When any of those things are happening, it’s sometimes a good idea to say, “Shall we take 5 minutes here?” Do you want to go and get a coffee? Does anybody need a nature break? I need to re-center myself and get...

Whatever the reason, there is no harm in taking an adjournment. And from my experience, when you do take an adjournment, we come back, 5, 10, 15 minutes later, everybody’s calmed down a little bit. Everybody has rethought things through. Maybe as a facilitator, I’ve had a chance to go and lobby one or two of the key players, or possibly go and have a quick chat with somebody that’s really stuck in a mode, one-on-one.

Whatever it might be, when we get back, we can restart the whole thing from the new starting point and get back on track whereas we could’ve stayed in that room before the adjournment for as long as we wanted and all we were doing was digging ourselves into a deeper hole.

- [CC] It changes people’s physical state as well ‘cause if they’re sitting there and things are going heated, heading in one direction or feeling stagnant, standing up and moving around, getting some fresh air, that also helps clear people’s mind simply by getting up and moving around.

- [JW] Yeah and we see it in sporting events as well. The halftime in a soccer game or a quarter time in an NFL footie game or after lunch in a cricket game, the impetus has all been going one way and then after the break, the other team starts to move into the ascendancy again.

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- [CC] Or tennis players call a timeout and then the other player gets really mad 'cause they were on fire and then the opponent is like: "Oh, they're on fire, I should probably call a timeout, injury break, injury break."

- [JW] Yeah, we see it in basketball as well and the whole point of that is to halt the moment going in the wrong direction so that I can reverse it. And it's a perfectly valid technique for a business environment.

- [CC] Yeah, fantastic. And our final tip for today on how to be a better workshop facilitator, where possible: meet key participants beforehand.

- [JW] Yeah, it's one that's often overlooked and it's so simple. If you're the independent facilitator of a fairly contentious issue, it's worth getting around to as many of the participants in a one-on-one situation, probably, reasonably informal, maybe just over a coffee. But to talk about what their viewpoint is, to build some sort of relationship with them, build a bit of engagement. You don't want to be going into that room where everybody sees you as a stranger because as a facilitator, you need a little bit of good will going in your favor if you're gonna be successful.

If you're coming in as a stranger, you don't have any investment or any good will in the bank. Just going and sharing a coffee, going and talking to people, listening to other people starts to get some investment in a relationship bank that you might be able to call on during the workshop itself.

- [CC] Do you meet them individually?

- [JW] Where possible, yeah. Certainly in small groups I wouldn't try to get the whole group together in one meeting and say, "Prior to the workshop I'm trying to build relationship with all of you." That wouldn't work.

- [CC] What sort of questions do you ask them?

- [JW] I outline the broad area that the workshop is gonna be about and I'd ask them whether they have any passionate thoughts on this, if they got any particular preferences, what do they see is a desirable outcome for them, so on and so forth. I start to anticipate where we might have tricky issues that I can prepare for before the event actually starts.

- [CC] It can also help to reduce your nerves going into that situation, into the facilitation because you've already met people. And I find it's the same when you're giving a presentation to an audience that you don't know, if you actually go up and introduce yourself to people, say in the front row or the first few rows beforehand, when you go up to speak, you feel like you've got some friends already, like "Oh, I know that person, she's cool, he's cool, he's friendly."

- [JW] It certainly does bolster the confidence and if nothing else, it just helps you remember people's names. 'Cause you might have 8, 12, 15 people in the room, if you're meeting them for the first time, it can be really quite off-putting if you don't know anybody's name or can't put names with faces, can't remember names.

If you've met them beforehand, you've got a much better chance or at least, sort of half or three

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quarters of the room, I've got a lock on their name, put their face with their name and that is quite a relaxing outcome for the facilitator to be going in the room that confident of knowing the people around him. It really does help.

- [CC] And then the people who haven't met you before, if they see their colleagues getting along well with you, they've already got rapport, they'll think "Oh, this John guy, must be all right."

- [JW] "Yeah, he's pretty cool."

- [CC] "Yeah, maybe I should cooperate."

- [JW] Let's be fair about this, the momentum is either gonna be going in one direction or the other. And I'd rather have that momentum moving in the positive direction from the start rather than the negative direction.

- [CC] If it does go in the negative direction for whatever reason and you've called an adjournment, you've come back and it's still not quite working out, do you have any other bonus tips for our listeners as to what they can do in that situation?[25:17](#)

- [JW] Yeah. One of the key things is come back to the agreed objectives of the session. Let's agree what we're trying to achieve. We're all here to try and get an outcome along these lines. What you got to remember is nearly every time we run one of these things; everybody in the room has the right intent. Often, most people in the room want to get to the same place, there might be some differences in destination that people are striving for, but often there's not a great deal of difference in the destination, it's more in the mechanisms of how we get there.

People are not coming into this negative to say, "I just want to destroy." Most people have got good intent to build greater value for their organization or for this initiative.

It's just about finding a compromise in the approach we take. If we go back to, let's remember what the overall objective of this session was, that's; where we're trying to get to and right now in the moment, we seem to be deadlocked in a position here, how can we chunk it up to a higher level and say, "Okay, we recognize at the detail level there's an issue here, but if we step up a layer, we're all trying to achieve this, so how can we compromise to achieve that outcome?"

- [CC] Fantastic. So, just to recap those seven workshop facilitation hints, we had number 1, facilitator is independent. Number 2, separate the idea generation and information gathering from the analysis. Number 3, agree the structure and ground rules up front. Number 4, manage time overtly. Number 5, agree the plan of action and document it at the end. Number 6, call an adjournment if things are heading off track and finally, number 7, where possible, meet key participants beforehand.

- [JW] Perfect. You could be running the next session.

- [CC] Yeah, I feel like I'm an expert now on facilitation, but nothing beats the practical implemen-



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tation.

- [JW] Takes practice.

- [CC] Certainly does. If you found this podcast useful, and you found it benefited you, make sure you check out the show notes at JHW.com.au/facilitation. We will have a PDF there of those seven points for you if that's something that you would like to send on to your colleagues or team members or whoever else you think would benefit from it.

Make sure you go to JHW.com.au/facilitation, also at JHW.com.au, you can find out more details of the Engagement Skills workshops that John runs in which there is also a session dedicated to going through those 7 steps and helping you to become a better facilitator too. And you do get to run a mock facilitation session during that workshop which is highly valuable. All right and that's it for this episode, thanks for tuning in and we'll see you next time. Thanks, John.

- [JW] Thanks, Christina.