Facilitation: Enhancing the Effectiveness and Efficiency of Environmental Decision Making

Jennifer Tucker
Environmental, Safety & Health Programs Directorate
ADI Technology Corporation; 2345 Crystal Drive; Arlington, Virginia 22202

DoD's overall performance in the environmental, safety and health arena will be measured in part by how its internal and inter-agency teams succeed in meeting their missions. Facilitation services at the team level can enhance both the effectiveness and efficiency of decision-making. This paper presents some of the problems faced by teams, describes how facilitation enhances their work, and suggests methods for selecting a facilitator. Building upon this foundation, the "facilitator-specialist" integrated support model is then presented as a useful tool for DoD environmental, safety and health policy teams working toward the resolution of issues critical to DoD's joint missions of readiness and sustainability.

> *Using cooperative methods makes it possible to access a critical resource for the world. That resource is **group synergy** - cooperative energy that will serve as the alternative fuel for the 21st century (Hunter et al).*

One of the primary challenges facing Department of Defense (DoD) environmental, safety and health (ESH) managers today is managing the work of both internal and external teams and workgroups, as they strive to develop policy and reach agreement on decisions.

Experience has shown the benefits that DoD can achieve from participating in partnerships at multiple organizational levels. Teams at the Federal Facility level have cited inter-agency partnerships as a major source of time and cost savings. Work groups are routinely convened to develop effective environmental, safety and health policies. In fact, teams meet to solve problems, make decisions, and create products every day.

Despite these successes, as information exchange becomes easier and more rapid, and the need for multi-party involvement in decisions increases, the complexity of managing team content and process emerges as a key concern.

THE PROBLEM WITH TEAMS

Despite the accolades that the "team-based approach" receives in environmental, safety and health decision-making, a central problem remains. **Teamwork is not easy.** Teams experience difficulties for the very reasons they are convened in the first place:

- There is no clear answer to a problem
- The task is complex or technically difficult
- There is too much or not enough information
- The problem impacts separate groups/functions
- Everyone's approval or cooperation is required
- The solution or "answer" will affect many people

These types of problems typically require input from many people, who bring different skills, knowledge, and experience to the table. When these people are also stakeholders (i.e., they have a vested interest in the outcome), they may bring unacknowledged assumptions, strong opinions, and deeply held beliefs to the table too.

So, where do we begin? Convening a diverse group of technically talented and experienced people to solve a problem does not automatically result in the benefits gained from effective teams. Ultimately, many teams fail because they are not provided the necessary structure and support with which to succeed. Today, we discuss the impact of this problem, and propose ways to help avoid it and ensure team success.
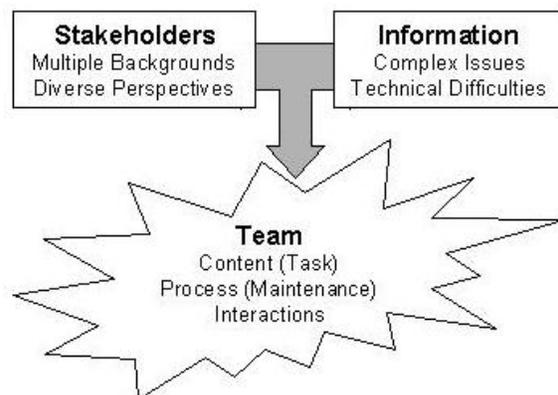
TEAMWORK REQUIRES A BALANCE

Teams are most effective and efficient when there is a balance between **content** and **process.** Content refers to the technical issues and concerns facing the group; process refers to the mechanisms by which the team addresses this content and the way the members interact with one another.
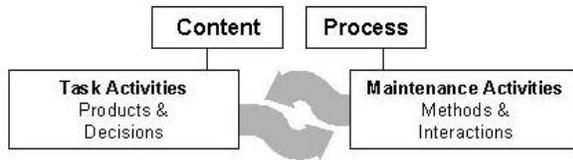
When unguided teams become both intellectually and emotionally emerged in the technical content underlying specific issues (too focused on content), they may fail to focus on the process of teamwork and decision-making.

What is the result? Well-meaning teams embroiled in technical evaluations may lose sight of the original mission, fall behind on critical schedules, and fail to generate the desired product or decision required. Ultimately, they may become so focused on content that they fail to complete the tasks (e.g., decisions and products) that the content was intended to support in the first place.

Other impacts may include unacknowledged conflict and a deterioration of mutual respect and trust. Clearly, these are not desired outcomes for the responsible manager committed to problem resolution, enhanced cooperation, and improved communication with agency stakeholders!

MAXIMIZING GROUP SYNERGY WITH FACILITATION

In past years, **facilitation** has emerged as a central tool for managing the problem-solving and decision-making process for teams and workgroups. Incorporating facilitation as a basic component of the environmental, safety and health management process allows managers to delegate team process to a neutral party – a party that will manage the process for the team, thereby allowing the members the freedom and safety to pursue the technical content.

An effective facilitator:

- Works with the team to identify its mission, goals, roles, and products
- Establishes and enforces ground rules that encourage desired behaviors
- Keeps the team focused toward its mission and goals, and uses process tools that achieve them
- Restates group discussions, ensuring common understanding, if not agreement
- Remains aware of group dynamics
- Encourages participation by all members
- Breaks down communication barriers, and intervenes when required
- Manages meeting logistics and communications
- Maintains the "group memory," to remind the team of where it has been and where it is going
- Saves the group time

TECHNICAL FACILITATION - NEUTRAL PROCESS SUPPORT

How does facilitation work? How does the facilitator interact with the team and its leader? How do managers find a good facilitator to help their teams? This section addresses some of the basic principles of the facilitation process.

Beginning the Process

The first contact a facilitator typically has with a team is through the team's leader, or the person managing the team's activities. This process may begin before the group is formed, or after the team has been convened. Sometimes, facilitation doesn't begin until long after the work has begun – in this scenario, a facilitator is often brought in for the primary purpose of helping the team get itself back on track.

There is some key information that will help guide how the facilitator interacts with the team. If the facilitator is brought in early in the process, he can help the leader (or team) establish these basic guiding factors:

- What was the primary driver (root cause) that caused the team to be convened?
- Who are the team members, and what is most important to each member?
- How were the team members selected?
- What is the group's charter? What are the primary decisions or products planned?
- What is the timeline for the group's work?
- How are decisions made? By consensus? Voting? By the leader with team input?
- Does the team have ground rules?
- What is the role of the leader with respect to team management and decisions?

If the team's efforts are already underway, it is vital to give the facilitator as much background information as possible, so that she is adequately prepared to help the team accomplish its goals.

Helping Work Get Done

A facilitator uses a variety of tools to help teams reach their goals. Resources used vary based upon the characteristics and needs of the group. They generally fall into two categories: those supporting the **task** activities (content) of the team, and those supporting the **maintenance** activities. Here are some examples.

Maintaining the **group memory** is one of the key roles of the facilitator, and supports both task and maintenance. Research indicates that there is typically only 30% agreement between any two members of a group asked to recall what happened in a meeting - immediately following that meeting (Daniels 1987). Imagine how that number might drop after a month has passed, particularly when technical material is involved! A good facilitator ensures that the team's work is recorded, both in a way that can be seen by the team during group meetings (e.g., chart paper) and through the preparation of meeting minutes.

Many facilitators will assign a separate person to keep the group record. This allows the facilitator to keep focused on the activity, while the recorder maintains the memory. Although this recorder may be a team member, it is often preferable to assign this to a neutral technical specialist, teamed with the facilitator, particularly if the team is working on complex or technically difficult products.

Concurrent with maintaining the group memory, the facilitator may use tools to **spark creativity** in a group. These exercises are designed to help teams "think outside the box" using diverse visual stimuli that encourage the creative process. Common examples include brainstorming, mind mapping (or mental modeling), and storyboarding.

The facilitator may also help the team **gather information** about its problem, proposed solutions, and potential outcomes. Using such activities as process flow mapping and force field analysis, these task-based tools allow teams to:

- Define "where they are now"
- Describe the true processes and flow paths at work in their organizations
- Identify their strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities (SWOTs)
- Recognize potential sources of support or resistance for each proposed solution

Three common tools that **aid decision-making** include the Assumption-Implication exercise, the Weighted Decision model, and the Multiple-Votes activity. These help teams: identify the criteria for alternative selection (what is the ultimate driver behind the decision?), assess the cause and effect of decisions, and evaluate the benefits and tradeoffs of alternatives.

There are also many tools oriented specifically toward group maintenance and interactions. These include conflict resolution techniques, personality and team assessment tools, and individual coaching. To be most effective, the team must openly accept their use, without undue pressure from the leader. When performed in this context, these tools can:

- Help team members better understand themselves and their interactions with others
- Provide team members skills for coping with conflict and difficult situations

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About Psychological Assessment Tools:

Three popular assessment tools to help teams and individuals grow include the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the FIRO-B Survey, and the Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument. Your facilitator must have specific training or certification to administer these, so be sure to discuss their use in advance.

Clearly, some of the tools described above require a particular level of trust among team members (and in the facilitator) before being used successfully. As such, many facilitators will wait until they have been clearly accepted as a trusted guide before introducing them.

Selecting a Facilitator

Once a team leader or manager decides that team facilitation would be useful, she must identify the facilitator that can best help the team succeed.

The work of facilitators interacting with DoD environmental, safety and health teams must necessarily cross traditionally separate disciplines, including:

- The **technical** sciences driving the content of scientific work (e.g., the physical and biological sciences, and the scientific process)
- The **social** sciences of human interaction and group dynamics (e.g., psychology, organizational behavior, and management)
- The **political** sciences driving how policy is created and implemented, and how government organizations operate and manage themselves

The best facilitators have a profound respect for (if not a basic understanding of) all three of these critical areas.

The degree to which your facilitator requires expertise in each of these disciplines depends upon the issue most critical to the team. Teams addressing complex scientific issues, but whose members appear to respect each other and the process, may benefit more from a technical facilitator who has a basic understanding of the scientific issues at hand. Teams that are experiencing intense conflict or process difficulties may, in turn, benefit more from a facilitator whose specialty lies in the behavioral sciences - regardless of technical content.

Finally, consider the personality characteristics of the facilitator, and how he might interact with team members and the leader. For example, some facilitators are more assertive in managing group dynamics, whereas others prefer to only intervene when clearly necessary to guide the process. Although neither approach is right or wrong, it is important that it be compatible with the team's wishes with respect to the facilitation process.

Here is a short list of characteristics that you may wish to consider when selecting a facilitator.

An effective facilitator:

- Listens actively, repeating what is said to ensure understanding
- Remains "present in the moment"
- Is steady, confident, open, and authentic
- Remains flexible, humble, and interested
- Is not afraid of conflict and is willing to confront it directly and compassionately
- Respects different learning styles
- Has a sense of humor

> *A vital characteristic of a good facilitator is the ability to* **remain neutral** *to the team's issues. Facilitators who appear, either openly or through subconscious behaviors, to have a stake in the team's content may compromise their ability to let the team members make their own decisions. In short, a good facilitator knows that the team's work belongs to the team.*

A Note Concerning Qualifications

Although some psychological assessment tools require specific certification or training, no standard certification or license is currently required for someone to carry the title "Facilitator." Furthermore, although there are many well respected and popular training programs specifically designed to help facilitators learn the tools of their trade (some even have trademarked names), these programs are not under the oversight of any formal "facilitation accreditation" system. As such, if a prospective facilitator tells you she is "certified," it is important to investigate precisely to what she is referring.

NOTE: Remember, this discussion is limited to identifying a **facilitator** to work with a team. There *are* formal certification and licensing programs for practitioners providing Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) support (including mediation or arbitration). If this level of formal support is required, you will need to investigate specialized resources.

EXPANDING THE FACILITATION MODEL – SUPPORTING BOTH PROCESS & CONTENT

As discussed previously, DoD teams often face complex technical, social, and political issues, all of which must be considered by the facilitator during the team process. When faced with particularly complex, difficult, or contentious technical issues that must be resolved in a short time frame (as so many environmental, safety and health teams are), it is often useful to have a two person support team involved in the facilitation process.

In the "integrated support model," the facilitator focuses on team process and interaction, while a second person – a **neutral technical specialist** – focuses upon supporting the content issues. Particularly beneficial when complementing the facilitator's style and skills, this technical specialist:

- Advises the team on technical issues
- Supports the team by completing research and drafting (or contributing to) work products
- Assists with maintaining the group memory

Outside of team meetings, the technical specialist also advises the facilitator, helping him become more familiar with the specialized subject matter. This enables the facilitator to design activities and group processes that are tailored to the specific types of technical issues being addressed.

This model has clear advantages for the already overbooked members of a technical team. First, it brings an extra set of technical hands to the table – hands that are designed to be available between meetings as well as during them.

Second, when a team trusts the technical specialist as a **neutral advisor**, it will often allow her to take team input and integrate it into "strawman" technical products between meetings for the team's review. This streamlining step allows the team to focus its time together on resolving the issues, rather than spending valuable time on the often painful and time-consuming "group writing" process.

In summary, whereas the single facilitator model results in a facilitator focus on process, with the team responsible for all content (usually including generating products between meetings), the integrated support model offers comprehensive support to the team for both the content and process components. Again, because the facilitator-specialist team is neutral, the products and decisions still belong to the group. In this scenario, however, the burden of the labor gets transferred to the facilitator-specialist team.

APPLYING THE MODEL FOR DoD TEAMS

The figure below demonstrates how the facilitator-specialist integrated support model may be applied for DoD environmental, safety and health teams. Often, these teams consist of Component policy experts from the Headquarters or Command/Claimant level, convened to create policy or guidance, which is to be implemented at the field level.

Because of the complexity of the issues, time pressure, individual workloads, and the pressure to represent multiple stakeholders' positions, it is no surprise that these teams often experience difficulties and delays!
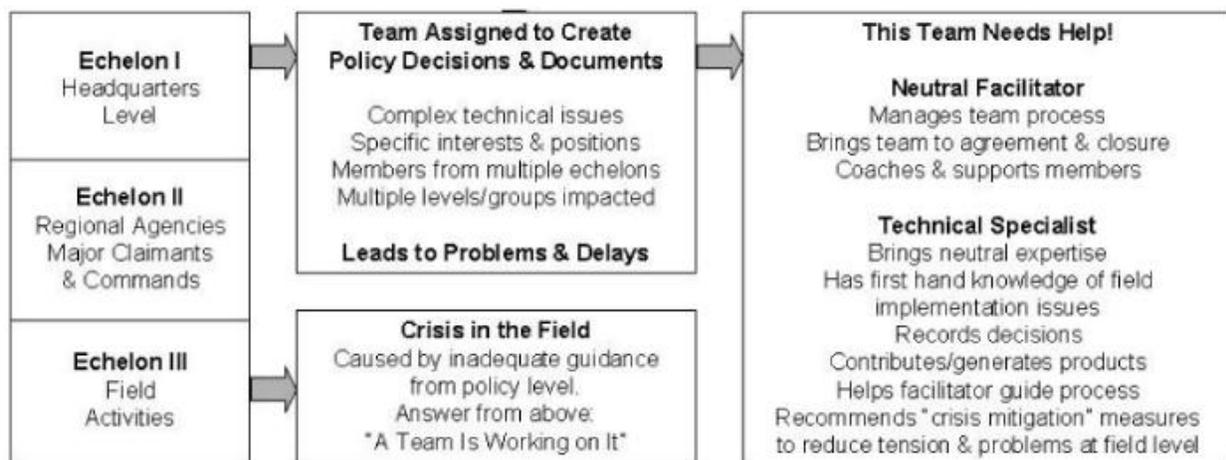
Additional problems may result if the team does not identify short-term mitigation steps for the field, of if it does not understand the implementation issues potentially resulting from the policy it is responsible for generating. Furthermore, because these teams are primarily convened at the policy level, they may be distanced and insulated from those field concerns, both by geography and organizational structure.

In the meantime, the basic concern or problems at the field level (which drove the creation of the policy team in the first place) continue, often leading to a crisis long before the group's work is done.

So, what happens? The team becomes frustrated because it isn't reaching its goals, and the field continues to be frustrated because of the lack of guidance, training, and oversight from above.

The introduction of the facilitator-specialist team is often what is needed to jump-start the team's work, encourage crisis mitigation measures for the field, resolve the conflicts that may have developed during the team's efforts, and generate the products needed by the field. Key points of the model are as follows:

- Both the facilitator and the specialist are neutral, so they are able to help the team as impartial support resources
- The technical specialist is selected based upon his familiarity with the technical issues involved. Therefore he is often well equipped to help the team consider the concerns that face the field, and to recommend emergency field mitigation measures while the team continues its work.
- The facilitator diligently focuses upon process and interaction dynamics, moving the team more efficiently and quickly toward the final closure required

IMPLICATIONS FOR DoD READINESS…

In closing, it is vital to consider how facilitation supports the dual goals of DoD readiness and environmental sustainability.

A successful team can accomplish that which no individual can do alone. As we have seen, the process of teamwork is not easy; however, with the right type of support, a team can generate ideas and products that have positive impacts throughout an organization – from the policy level to the field.

Surely, this type of contribution both supports the DoD mission and improves the environment in which we live.

Furthermore, facilitation enhances self-awareness and individual learning and growth. People who have contributed to a successful team carry knowledge and skills that can be applied in a multitude of situations. Improving the individual ultimately improves the organization as a whole.

Maintaining readiness and sustainability is as much a process as it is an outcome or status. Facilitation reminds us of this fact, by helping teams realize the maximum potential of the journey, as well as the benefits of a goal achieved for all.

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AUTHOR CONTACT INFORMATION

Jennifer Tucker
ADI Technology Corporation
Phone: 703-416-9893
Email: Jennifer.Tucker@aditech.com
http://www.concentric.net/~tuckerj
Presented at NDIA Event #044 – March 2000