# RISK FACILITATION MADE EASY

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## ABSTRACT

A skilled facilitator is a key success factor in ensuring that groups function well together. The root of the word "facilitate" is the Latin *facilis*, which means easy, so a facilitator is supposed to make it easier for the group to achieve their intended outcomes. But too often facilitation is seen as a difficult task, and our meetings and workshops struggle to produce valuable results. This is especially true for risk workshops, where the need to work with uncertainty makes things even harder.

This paper starts by explaining the basic theory of facilitation, including the role of the facilitator, and the range of available facilitation styles across the Facilitation Spectrum. Three distinct styles are considered: Directive, Collaborative and Supportive. Guidelines are presented on how and when each style is most useful in the setting of a facilitated risk workshop.

Having laid the conceptual groundwork, the remainder of this paper focuses on practical advice for effective facilitation. Seven types of difficult individual are outlined, with strategies for handling them. Influences on group behaviour are also explored, and the use of applied emotional literacy is explained as a tool for managing group dynamics during the risk workshop.

Finally the paper presents critical success factors for effective facilitation of risk workshops, challenging those responsible for this vital role to develop and improve their facilitation skills in order to support more successful outcomes.

## FACILITATION BASICS

### The Facilitation Challenge

Managing risk is a challenge for many reasons. There are lots of barriers to effective risk management, including organisational, practical, procedural and personal (Hillson, 2011; Hillson & Simon, 2012, pp. 11-15). As a result many people don't bother with risk management, or if they do then they see it as a necessary chore or bureaucratic overhead. Too much so-called "risk management" involves simply ticking boxes, going through the motions, attending risk workshops and review meetings, and getting it over with as quickly as possible so we can return to the real job. Whatever this is, it is not managing risk.

There are many ways to overcome the barriers to managing risk properly (Hillson, 2011). One of the most effective is to use a skilled facilitator. The word facilitator has its roots in the Latin *facilis* meaning "easy" (Collins, 1979). So the facilitator's role is *to make things easier for others*, helping them to achieve their goals as efficiently as possible. A good facilitator understands the barriers and has proven tools and techniques for dealing with them.

Facilitation skills are helpful in a wide range of settings, but they have particular value when we are dealing with risk (Pullan & Murray-Webster, 2011). If we define risk as "uncertainty that matters" (Hillson, 2004, 2009), then both the inherent uncertainty and the potential for significant consequences are likely to make people cautious in the way they approach risk. This will inevitably affect their behaviour in a risk workshop, where they are required to identify risks (which could be

seen as an *a priori* admission of failure or weakness), assess risks (relying on their subjective judgement with which others are likely to disagree), and propose risk responses (which might be turned back on them as risk owners, increasing their responsibility and workload).

But the risk workshop is really important, and it is not just another meeting – we need to get it right if we are to identify the real risks that we face. Risks require clear descriptions and robust assessments as they indicate the areas requiring particular focused attention and action. Risk responses define what needs to be done in order to minimise avoidable problems and maximise achievable benefits. Risk reports are important as they tell people about what is coming and what they need to do to get ready. In short, risk management matters and we need to get it right.

A good facilitator will make it easy for participants to get the best from the risk workshop, and they can also help after the workshop in maintaining commitment and energy to implement agreed risk responses and report risk status to key stakeholders (Hillson, 2011). The role of a facilitator is to "make things easier", and there are two main ways in which a facilitator can achieve this goal for groups undertaking a risk workshop:

- *Easier than individuals working alone* – by helping a group to function effectively together, the facilitator ensures that multiple perspectives are shared openly and brought together to provide a common understanding of the risks facing the project and the responses required to address them.

- *Easier than the group working alone* – by taking care of process and practical elements of the risk workshop, the facilitator can release the group to concentrate on the task in hand, ensuring that participants can dedicate their full attention to identifying and assessing risks and developing appropriate responses.

## The Facilitator's Characteristics

According to Pullan and Murray-Webster (2011, pp. 40-44), a good facilitator must be able to:

- Work with large and diverse groups

- Manage their own state and that of the groups with which they work

- Work face-to-face or virtually

- Deal with conflict

- Use a wide range of facilitation tools and techniques

- Sustain participation

- Guide groups to outcomes

More generally, we might add that the risk facilitator needs the following:

- Process skills

- People skills

- Domain knowledge

- Responsive approach

- Flexible attitude

- Situational awareness

- Appropriate behaviour

In addition to the ability to apply these skills in a workshop setting, the risk facilitator must be able to think, listen, write and organise – all at the same time (not an easy feat!).

# THE FACILITATION SPECTRUM

## Defining Facilitation Styles

When a facilitator is leading a group in a facilitated workshop or meeting, he/she can adopt a range of facilitation styles. These vary by the amount of control exercised by the facilitator compared with the degree of control allowed for the group. Exhibit 1 illustrates the Facilitation Spectrum, which shows a continuous range of the balance between facilitator control and group control. On the far left-hand side, the facilitator has almost complete control over what happens in the workshop or meeting. By contrast, on the far right-hand side the group has near-total control of proceedings. Between these extremes lie various shared positions in which the balance of control differs between facilitator and group.
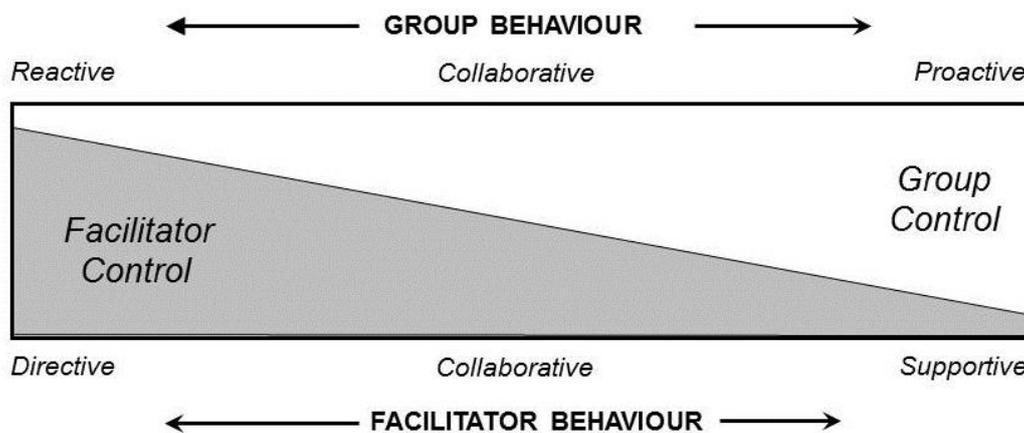


**Exhibit 1 – The Facilitation Spectrum**

Although the Facilitation Spectrum is a continuous range, it is helpful to distinguish three zones across the spectrum. In Zone 1, the facilitator takes the lead with a Directive style, while the group is in Reactive mode, following the facilitator. Zone 3 has the group operating in a Proactive manner, with the facilitator in a Supportive role. Between these two lies Zone 2, in which both facilitator and group are in Collaborative mode, working together to achieve the best outcomes from the workshop or meeting. We can describe the facilitator's function in each of these three zones in several ways, as shown in Exhibit 2.

| DESCRIPTION | ZONE 1 | ZONE 2 | ZONE 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Style | Directive | Collaborative | Supportive |
| Title | Boss | Partner | Friend |

| Position | In front | Alongside | Behind |
|----------|----------|-----------|--------|
| Verbalisation | "Do this!" | "Shall we…?" | "How can I help?" |

**Exhibit 2 – Facilitator role in Zones 1/2/3 of the Facilitation Spectrum**

## Using Different Facilitation Styles in a Risk Workshop

Having recognised that the risk facilitator can operate in a range of different styles, this raises a further question: When should we use each style? Different styles are appropriate at different points in a facilitated risk workshop.

The typical risk workshop passes through several stages, which correspond to Tuckman's model of team formation: Forming/Storming, Norming, Performing, Adjourning (Tuckman, 1965). During these stages, the group performs different tasks, as shown in Exhibit 3. Each stage and task requires the facilitator to adopt a different style, also shown in Exhibit 3.

| TUCKMAN STAGE | WORKSHOP TASKS | FACILITATION STYLE |
|---------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Forming/Storming | Objective-setting<br><br>Agenda & Ground rules | Directive |
| Norming | Workshop initiation<br><br>Corrective input | Directive/Collaborative |
| Performing | Identify and assess risks<br><br>Develop responses | Collaborative/Supportive |
| Adjourning | Workshop wrap-up<br><br>Summary & next steps | Directive |

**Exhibit 3: Mapping facilitation styles to risk workshop tasks**

Exhibit 3 shows that a Directive style is appropriate at the beginning and end of the risk workshop, when the facilitator needs to give the workshop a clear start (clarifying objectives, defining the agenda and setting ground rules), and when the workshop is closed out (dealing with outstanding issues and questions, summarising outcomes and clarifying next steps). Both of these stages work best when the facilitator takes charge to provide the necessary input and guidance to workshop participants.

However Exhibit 3 also indicates that alternative facilitation styles might work in the mid-part of the risk workshop. This depends on the maturity and experience of the people involved, both in terms of the background of individuals and also how established they are as a group. With a more mature group the facilitator can adopt a more Collaborative or Supportive style, allowing the group to take more responsibility for the workshop. However when the group or its constituent individuals are less experienced, the facilitator will need to step back into Directive mode, to keep the workshop on track. These two alternative paths for the risk workshop are illustrated in Exhibit 4.
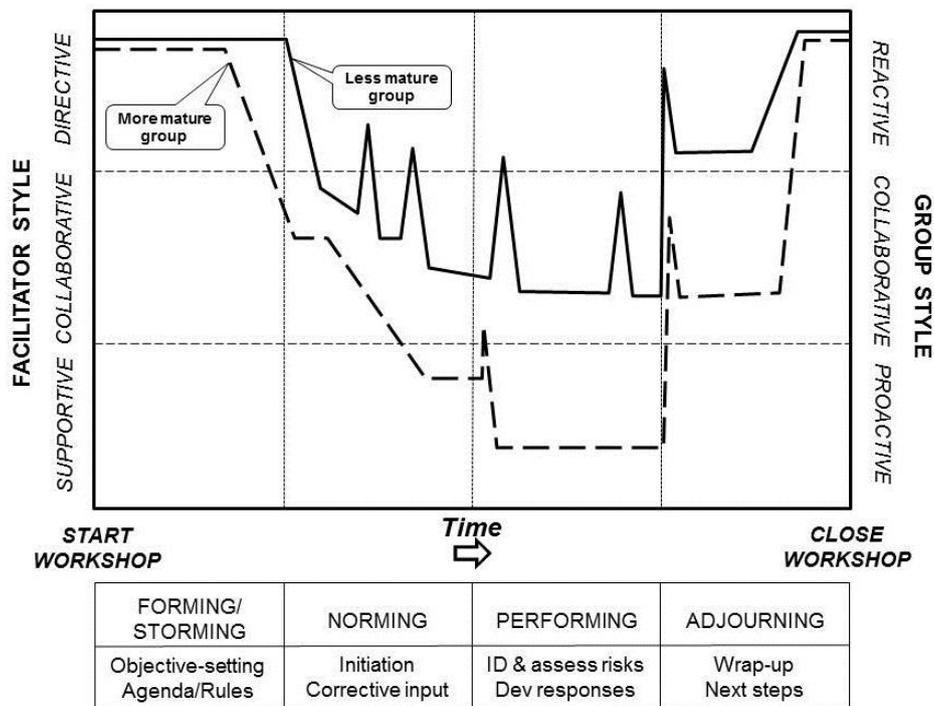


**Exhibit 4: Using facilitation styles during a risk workshop**

## Using Different Facilitation Styles for Risk Identification

There are many available techniques for identifying risks (Project Management Institute, 2009, pp 72-86; Project Management Institute, 2013, pp 324-327). It is helpful to recognise that different facilitation styles work best for various risk identification techniques. Examples of which styles are most appropriate for common risk identification techniques include:

- *Brainstorming*. This technique requires a strong Directive style from the facilitator, in order to set up and enforce the ground rules, to manage group dynamics, to encourage quiet individuals to contribute, to channel dominant individuals, to prevent distractions and diversions, to maintain the schedule, to reach consensus on outputs, and to record identified risks properly.

- *Assumptions & Constraints Analysis*. Examination of project assumptions and constraints as potential sources of risk requires a disciplined and structured approach that is best supported by a Directive facilitation style. Each assumption or constraint is tested in two dimensions, for its stability and its sensitivity, and those assessed as both unstable and sensitive are converted into risk statements. The facilitator needs to keep the group focused on following this

analytical process in order to ensure the quality of the output.

- *SWOT Analysis.* This technique requires the group to start with known facts about the project organisation (Strengths and Weaknesses), then to use these factors as prompts to consider how they might lead to Opportunities or Threats for the project. Since the base information comes from the group, the facilitator needs a Collaborative style to draw on their knowledge and experience while working with them to transform strengths into opportunities and explore how weaknesses generate threats.

- *Influence diagram.* A Collaborative style works well when the group is building an influence diagram to model the key relationships and dependencies within the project in order to determine areas of maximum uncertainty. Group members bring detailed knowledge of project characteristics and parameters, while the facilitator has knowledge of how to structure this information into an influence diagram. The technique can only work if both facilitator and group work together alongside each other.

- *Delphi group.* When input is required from recognised domain experts, the facilitator should adopt a Supportive style, providing a neutral channel for subject-matter experts to make their contribution without challenging or influencing their views.

- *Lessons-to-be-learned review.* Review of experience on previous similar projects can reveal risks that might be relevant to this project. Lessons-to-be-learned are often held in a project archive or knowledge repository, and these should be examined to determine whether previously-identified risks are definitely applicable, mere possibilities, or not applicable. This requires detailed knowledge both of previous projects and the current project, which the risk facilitator is unlikely to possess. Consequently a Supportive facilitation style is required, to enable the project team to perform an effective lessons-to-be-learned review.

## PEOPLE SKILLS

In addition to being able to flex their facilitation style to meet the varying challenges of the risk workshop and different risk identification techniques, the risk facilitator also needs to handle the people who participate in the risk workshop, to gain their cooperation and contribution, and to maximise the value of their input. This requires a broad set of interpersonal skills, at both individual and group levels.

### Dealing with Difficult Individuals

While not everyone is difficult, it is common to find at least some participants in every risk workshop who are not fully committed to its success, or who are not willing to contribute freely. Exhibit 5 lists seven types of workshop blockers. Most risk facilitators will recognise these individuals from their experience in leading risk workshops, and every risk facilitator will need to develop strategies to handle them appropriately. These are also listed in Exhibit 5.

| TYPE | CHARACTERISTICS | MANAGEMENT STRATEGY |
|---|---|---|
| *Aggressive* | These people do not want to be in the workshop, think it is a waste of time, and actively oppose what the facilitator is trying to achieve. They are often loud, argumentative and critical, and their behaviour distracts others from contributing. | *Defuse*. Give them time to make their point, and do not argue with them, listen patiently, and use conciliatory language. If necessary speak to them outside the meeting during a break, asking for more tolerance, seeking their active support. |
| *Complainer* | Everything is wrong for a complainer, from the room size or temperature to the meeting time and duration, the list of participants, the type of coffee and biscuits, the agenda and scope of the workshop, and so on. | *Defer*. Listen to their complaints, and acknowledge anything which is valid. Then agree to address concerns outside the meeting. Deal with immediate matters during a break, and take up other issues later. |
| *Know-it-all* | Some people delight in expressing their opinion and demonstrating their expert knowledge of a topic, even when they are not real experts. They have strong opinions and voice them confidently. They are the first to answer every question, often dismissing the views of others as uninformed or naïve. | *Demur*. Recognise valid expertise, and play back their opinion so they know they have been heard and appreciated, then extend on their input if possible, building on it to regain the initiative. |
| *Agreeable* | While agreeable individuals may appear to be the facilitator's friend, they often fail to share their true opinion for fear of upsetting someone or being criticised. They smile and nod encouragingly, but shy away from disagreeing with others, and are often reluctant to speak first in any debate. | *Direct*. Beware of allowing them to get away with "being nice", and challenge them to express their true opinions. Ask them to contribute first from time to time. |
| *Negative* | These people will disagree on principle with others, seeing it as their role to give the opposing viewpoint (even if they don't believe it). They undermine the facilitator and other participants by casting doubt on the truth or reliability of their inputs, and prevent consensus through constant nay-saying. | *Detach*. Maintain a degree of neutrality, not allowing them to get you on their side in criticising others. Accept valid alternative viewpoints, but aim for realistic compromise. Depersonalise their opposition, make it about the process or the principle but not about the person. |
| *Staller* | For the staller, there is never enough information to make a firm judgement or to give a clear opinion. They wish to defer everything until later, when more data is available or more progress has been made. | *Delegate*. Explore reasons why they are reluctant to offer an opinion on the available data, find out exactly what additional information they require, and give them an action to bring it to the next meeting. Encourage them to give an interim assessment on the current data. |
| *Silent* | Some people just refuse to contribute. They sit quietly but will not speak up to give their opinion, even when challenged or specifically invited to do so. | *Decline*. Refuse to accept non-participation or withdrawal. Ask them direct open questions, then wait for an answer, using silence as a motivator. Speak to them in a break to encourage participation. |

**Exhibit 5: Handling difficult individuals**

## Understanding group behaviours

Groups are more than the sum of their constituent individuals, and group behaviour is challenging to understand and manage proactively, especially when they are addressing risk (Hillson & Murray-Webster, 2008, pp 65-82). The risk facilitator must understand the drivers of group behaviour in the setting of a risk workshop, and be able to counter sources of potential bias in order to maximise the robustness and reliability of the outcome.

Group behaviour is influenced by both external sources (situational factors) and internal sources (heuristics). The most common of these are listed in Exhibit 6.

| EXTERNAL (Situational Factors) | INTERNAL (Heuristics) |
|---|---|
| **Familiarity**: Level of relevant skill, knowledge or expertise | **Groupthink** : Follow the majority |
| **Manageability**: Possibility of control or choice | **"Moses factor"** : Follow the leader |
| **Proximity**: Closeness of risk in time or space | **Cultural conformity** : The way we do things here |
| **Propinquity**: Potential for direct consequences for self or project | **Risky/Cautious shift** : Tending towards extremes |

**Exhibit 6: Drivers of group behaviour**

Understanding and managing these drivers requires the risk facilitator to use a degree of applied emotional literacy, as embodied in the Six A's Model in Exhibit 7 (Murray-Webster & Hillson, 2008).
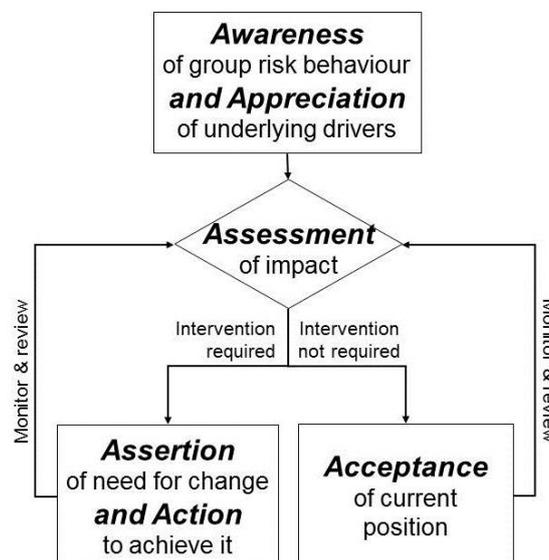


**Exhibit 7: The Six A's Model of applied emotional literacy**

(from Murray-Webster & Hillson, 2008; used with permission)

The Six A's Model is described in detail by Murray-Webster and Hillson (2008, pp 79-87), but it can be summarised as follows:

- First, there is a need for *Awareness* of the current behaviour of the group in the risk workshop, together with an *Appreciation* of the underlying drivers (both external and internal).

- Next comes *Assessment*, to determine whether the current group behaviour is likely to lead to an acceptable outcome for the risk workshop or not.

- Where the Assessment step shows that the existing group is unlikely to cause major difficulties for the risk workshop, the current situation can be *Accepted*.

- If on the other hand Assessment indicates that intervention is required to modify the prevailing situation, *Assertion* and *Action* are employed to make the necessary change. Assertion requires a clear statement of the implications of the current approach, and why it needs to be modified. Action is then taken to create a changed environment for the risk workshop. This can be achieved either by exerting a Directive style to reinforce the agreed ground rules, or through a Collaborative approach where the group and facilitator together develop an agreed way to move forward.

- Whether the current group behaviour is accepted or modified, the ongoing situation must be monitored and reassessed by the facilitator constantly throughout the risk workshop to determine whether intervention may be required at a later time.

# CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS FOR RISK FACILITATION

We have explored the three main facilitation styles available to the risk facilitator when assisting a project team through the risk management process, and when they are most useful. There are several critical success factors (CSFs) which will maximise the effectiveness of the risk facilitator, particularly in a risk workshop setting, as follows:

- Ensure that the risk workshop has a clear purpose, and that your role is also clear and agreed.

- Invest time in thorough preparation and planning before the workshop, getting to know the project, the people and the current issues.

- Be able to use an appropriate facilitation style, capable of switching between Directive, Collaborative and Supportive as required.

- Prepare contingency plans in advance for foreseeable problems during the workshop, especially with potentially difficult people.

- Ensure that the first five minutes of the workshop is strong, with a good introduction, precise objective-setting, a well-structured agenda, and defined ground rules.

- Intervene appropriately to handle difficult individuals, balancing support and challenge as required.

- Take full account of group behaviour throughout the workshop, maintaining a high degree of awareness of what is going on and appreciation of the underlying reasons why it is happening.

- Be yourself, inject energy into the workshop, and always be proactive.

# CONCLUSION

The role of risk facilitator is a key contributor to the success (or otherwise) of the risk process, particularly in determining whether the risk workshop achieves its objectives. Too often risk workshops are held without a facilitator at all, or facilitators are appointed who lack the necessary skills and experience. The ability to facilitate risk workshops effectively requires a unique skillset, as outlined in this paper. By following the guidelines presented here, risk facilitators will become more able to assist project teams towards finding the real risks on their projects, assessing them objectively and realistically, and developing appropriate risk responses to minimise threats and maximise opportunities.

The outcome of the risk management process is too important to leave to chance. We cannot arrange risk workshops and just hope that they deliver. Neither can the role of facilitator be filled by just anyone who happens to be available. Risk management matters, risk workshops are a vital part of the process, and effective risk facilitators are critical to their success.

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