

Independent facilitation.....

Enabling clients to respond to customer needs through effective meetings focussed on the achievement of mutual objectives.



Background

Commercial relationships have and are becoming even more complex. That is partly driven by an objective of increasing value for money, partly driven by increasing numbers of “partnering” type arrangements and often influenced by the need to involve a variety of stakeholders in solving complex issues. It is no longer simply a matter of tight commercial sub-contracts, but adjectives such as “partnering”, “joint”, “flat structure”; “open” are becoming more popular. Processes involving a slow cascade of formal change through long sub-contractor chains are no longer acceptable.

Although this increasingly complexity in relationships exists to some degree across all sectors, it is particularly true of the public sector with the introduction of Integrated Project Teams (IPT), “Rainbow Teams” and “Working Groups”. These approaches not only require a change in culture, but a degree of trust which will take considerable time to build and which in many cases, despite a genuine willingness, are difficult behaviours to achieve.

Many clients we have spoken to mention their frustration with what they see as a genuine desire to have effective working relationships with their suppliers and customers but struggle to implement the reality – especially when things get tough!

The Challenge

Almost by definition, there is an inherent mistrust in any commercial relationship. Large corporations operating in increasingly competitive environments add to this pressure.

Facilitation is the mechanism by which meetings are made more effective through the management of “difficulties and obstacles” – usually, but not exclusively, in

real time. Facilitation does not add content – it is there to enable a robust and mutually agreeable outcome. This is achieved by managing the process and interaction (and therefore behaviours) of the participants, pre-empting blockers and issues and planning navigation strategies which are then executed in real time. Facilitators create a favourable environment and optimise the behaviour set from the participants, for example by making sure all the views are aired and given due consideration.

How many meetings have you attended where objectives aren't clearly stated or agreed let alone achieved – where all the parties don't contribute – where the outcome isn't clearly and efficiently documented? Facilitation addresses these and can be applied to small meetings through to large scale events.

Facilitators often originate from one of the parties involved in the meeting or event. However, it is best to try and avoid the immediate team since the facilitator must be the process owner and therefore independent of the decision. This works well in many situations. However, when relationships have a long history of mistrust or the agendas of each party aren't (or can't be) shared, having a facilitator from one of the party's organisations can leave a residual doubt of the objectivity of the facilitation.

Independent facilitation addresses this by the genuine independence of the facilitator – specifically to achieve an objective and balanced outcome – ensuring all views are aired, respected and considered. They will spend time with all parties and understand the issues, potential difficulties and obstacles and plan mechanisms to deal with them. This builds a degree of trust with the parties involved who will naturally perceive the handing off of some of their commercial position to the facilitator. In practice however, skilful facilitation resolves issues in the least emotive way to all parties and thereby finds a path through the challenging areas.

Consequently independent facilitation is most suited to

- ❖ Commercial contracts where different parties need to work together to deliver – especially in times when the contract is under stress
- ❖ Project environments – especially customer reviews and formal sign off
- ❖ Board meetings - where conflicts of agendas and personalities can preclude objective discussions and decisions

Of course facilitation can be also used as a part of a change process – the behaviours created through a facilitated meeting or event are often those necessary to effectively manage a change process. The temporary change in behaviour can become sustained through the use of facilitation as a method supporting a change agenda.



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turning good ideas into operational reality

.....continued



If corporations are to achieve increased value for money, independent facilitation can provide one mechanism which offers considerable improvements in meeting effectiveness.

Let's take a real scenario:

A large commercial contract with many facets requires all the players in the supply chain to come together to resolve an issue. Different specialist teams of project and engineering management have conflicting agendas. Pressure is on to resolve the issue, but despite having a clear objective – the resolution of the issue - the parties simply go round and round without a clear mechanism to resolve it. The meeting adjourns with a number of actions to investigate further, but in reality, the issue is no further forward.

Independent facilitation before the meeting or event involves working with each of the stakeholders to understand all the issues and define a process – a mechanism – by which the issue(s) can be resolved by the parties present. Often this mechanism is agreed with key stakeholders to validate it. This may involve challenging the need for all the participants, defining methods by which multiple aspects of the issue resolution can be addressed in parallel (syndicate groups), but critically the time is spent moving the issue forward and capturing the resolution in the most effective and efficient way possible.

At the meeting or event, all parties are given the opportunity to raise issues in open forum, and the process is managed to ensure as many issues are dealt with as possible. Different methods exist to achieve this depending on the nature of the meeting and/or participants. Critically, any issues which are raised during the meeting are dealt with either during the meeting, or become clear action items – thus ensuring everyone leaves satisfied that their own issues have progressed.

Following the meeting or event, it is important to ensure that all parties feel that their own burning issues have been, or are being addressed. Facilitation often therefore involves a follow up and “slow-time” checking to resolve any outstanding concerns regarding progress.

By this method of preparation, event and review, evaluations have shown the effectiveness of the overall process is significantly involved.

The JAC proposition

Clearly these new style relationships are going to take some time to become the norm – indeed they may only do so in certain types of commercial relationship.

So the good news is that there is no need for project managers and commercial managers to become highly competent facilitators as an urgent priority over other skills.

However, as businesses continue to expect more from their commercial relationships, in particular, where difficulties occur, the value of independent facilitation comes to the fore.

JA Consulting has significant experience in facilitation in many business domains and a large range of event scales – from urgent issue resolution meetings of 3 or 4 people to large design reviews with >250 individuals.

Our experience includes large scale MoD procurements (asset based and private financed), sales events (new product, price increases etc), strategy planning, communications, operations, risk and project management.

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