

Facilitation

05 Sep 2017

ADRAC gratefully acknowledges the authorship of Dr Rosemary Howell who kindly prepared this paper.

Introduction

Charting the processes on the Dispute Resolution continuum, from avoidance to litigation, it is not always clear where facilitation fits. As 'ADR' moves firmly into the mainstream to become an accepted part of DR and experiences stronger efforts to categorise and prescribe its processes, facilitation has flourished, without the same scrutiny, outside the mainstream.

This is not because of a lack of clarity about what facilitation is and does. It is more likely a feature of the fact that as processes such as mediation and conciliation become more 'mainstream' and lose their 'alternative' tag, there remain many circumstances in which there are opportunities for a facilitative practice offering more diversity and flexibility much earlier in the conflict resolution process or indeed even before conflict has broken out.

What is facilitation? – a discussion of some definitions

Before its untimely demise, the National Alternative Dispute Resolution Advisory Council (NADRAC)'s ground-breaking work included its review of dispute resolution processes and their classification into facilitative, advisory and determinative – describing facilitative processes as:

'processes involv[ing] a third party, often with no advisory or determinative role, providing assistance in managing the process of dispute resolution. These processes include mediation, conciliation and facilitation'.

Its section on dispute resolution terms then defined facilitation as a:

'process in which the parties (usually a group), with the assistance of a dispute resolution practitioner (the facilitator), identify problems to be solved, tasks to be accomplished or disputed issues to be resolved. Facilitation may conclude there, or it may continue to assist the parties to develop options, consider alternatives and endeavour to reach an agreement. The facilitator has no advisory or determinative role on the content of the matters discussed or the outcome of the process, but may advise on or determine the process of facilitation'.

This definition has been adopted by other dispute resolution bodies such as the Australian Disputes Centre.

The NADRAC definition raises two important issues for comment. The first is to note that, as with NADRAC's definition of mediation, the definition focusses more on what facilitators do and what happens rather than what it is. Rather than being a deficiency, this recognises that facilitation has many faces and the things that make it so difficult to define are a reflection of its flexibility and versatility. As the mediation field pushes for a single, tighter and more prescriptive definition, facilitation has been allowed to flourish without the same drive to control and direct its operation.

The second point to note in the NADRAC definition is the reference to a 'dispute resolution practitioner'. Whilst this description of a facilitator is certainly appropriate where the facilitation is occurring 'in the shadow of the law' or in the face of a fully-formed dispute, there are many facilitators who operate in a space where there are no legal issues in play and in fact there may not be any conflict at all. Also, since engagement in mediation usually requires the parties, in their mediation agreement, to identify the substance of their dispute, some parties prefer facilitation where there is the opportunity to reflect on differences and work towards a good outcome without formally acknowledging (and possibly entrenching) a conflict.

As a consequence, many facilitators would say that a simple explanation of their role is to make it easy or convenient for groups to come together and achieve some movement or outcome.

Types of facilitation

The literature¹ explores facilitation by looking at the role of the facilitator and the form of the facilitation. Broadly speaking, a facilitator will either assume the role of independent, neutral party who is the keeper of the **process** only or a group member who is a content expert and accordingly has a role in both **process and content**. A number of influences determine this including what is culturally appropriate; what has been historically effective and what is necessary to engage and obtain the confidence of the group being facilitated.

Generally the form of facilitation is identified as being either basic (again this is a content only process) or developmental (process and content). There is a lot of discussion involving the benefits of the different types of facilitation which are covered well in Schwarz's definition:

'A basic facilitator fulfills her responsibility to the group by designing an effective process for the group to accomplish its work, acting consistently with the core values, identifying for the group when members have acted inconsistently (or consistently) with principles of effective group behaviour and letting the group make free and informed choices on the basis of the facilitator's interventions. In addition, a developmental facilitator helps group members learn how to identify when they have acted inconsistently with principles of effective group behaviour, how to explore the conditions that create the ineffective behaviour and how to change these conditions to generate more effective behaviour.'

When is facilitation used?

The author of the ADRAC paper on conciliation described it as a 'matrix of ...practices' – a very useful expression which applies equally to facilitation. Part of the value of facilitation is in its many faces and usefulness in a range of different circumstances. It is probably impossible to describe all the applications however

some of the circumstances in which facilitation plays a useful role are when parties want:

- the skills of a process expert to help them develop and implement a situation-specific process to achieve the project, objective or purpose of the group
- to add a level of gravitas or formality to proceedings so as to maintain focus, encourage more cooperative and respectful behaviour and manage disruptive behaviour effectively
- assistance to investigate options, develop goals and define specific achievements
- an independent outsider with the skills to know when to intervene and when to let things play out

Core competencies and accreditation

There are many facilitation training programs offered throughout Australia. These range from postgraduate subjects offered by universities such as the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) to those offered by the International Association of Facilitators (IAF). There are also many privately offered programs. Regular professional development programs are also publicised via the Australasian Facilitators Network (AFN), a loose association of more than 900 facilitation professionals in Australia, New Zealand, South-East Asia and the Pacific who share information, expertise and training opportunities.²

Significant work has been undertaken by IAF, a worldwide professional body established to 'promote, support and advance the art and practice of professional facilitation'.

As is to be expected in a field whose practitioners operate in many different arenas, there is significant debate and discussion about how to define the skills of a competent facilitator.

The IAF has made a significant contribution to the debate via an international consultation with its members from which it developed the Facilitator Competencies Framework. This 'sets out the basic set of skills, knowledge, and behaviours that

facilitators must have in order to be successful facilitating in a wide variety of environments’.

The 5 elements cover:

- creating collaborative client relationships
- planning appropriate group processes
- creating and sustaining a participatory environment
- guiding group to appropriate and useful outcomes
- building and maintaining professional knowledge

The IAF has also taken a leadership role in the development of an industry accreditation scheme which awards the Certified Professional Facilitator (CPF) credential to facilitators who demonstrate proficiency in the application of the IAF core competencies model.

Styles of facilitation

Whilst anecdotally it is apparent that there are many different styles of facilitation, and this is supported by the variety of training programs on offer, there is little research available to provide insight into the most widely-used facilitation processes.

The most recent study was undertaken in 2006³ and, while it set out to conduct a reflective practice survey of the language of facilitation it also provided useful data about the processes favoured by facilitators. The international call for participation in the survey produced 140 respondents with 60% having more than 10 years facilitation practice. The table below provides the data revealing the usage rate of different facilitation approaches.

Table 1: Facilitation approaches used

Facilitation approaches	Number of respondents
Schwarz "Skilled facilitator"	3
Visual & Graphic Facilitation	3
Action Learning	5
No such thing! (Depends on requirements)	5
Future search	6

My Own	6
Story/Narrative approaches	7
Experiential styles	7
Conventional approaches	10
Other	12
World Café	23
Appreciative Inquiry	24
Technology of Participation	26
Open Space Technology	45

This chart presents a strong message about diversity of practice. While there is currently a call to consider updating this 2006 research which is now quite dated, what the chart above does identify clearly is the very wide range of facilitation processes being used by practising facilitators. This can be contrasted with the mediation environment where a similar survey of practising mediators would be unlikely to identify more than 4 or 5 mediation models.

It would be interesting to discover what are currently the most widely used facilitation models in Australia. A search of online activity about the four most widely identified models on the chart above indicates that they still have relevance and active followers.

An informal survey of government and non-for profit users has demonstrated a widespread use of the World Café model in this country. As community consultation (which almost always requires some kind of facilitated process) becomes legislatively prescribed for many government departments, this process which accommodates large and diverse groups very effectively, appears to be becoming the model of choice.⁴

The future

Looking forward, there are a number of challenges to be considered.

1. Managing the tension between flexibility, training and accreditation

If, as has been suggested in this paper, flexibility is a desirable and valuable feature of facilitation, then issues of training and accreditation provide possible points of

friction. In the mediation field, for example, the national accreditation process binds mediators to a single mediation model – the facilitative model – and this reflects the fact that the dominant mediation training model is a facilitative one. By contrast, in the facilitation field, there does not appear to be a dominant training model or accreditation regime. Again this is a reflection of the diversity of the field and the absence of a single or dominant voice for facilitators.

Furthermore there is no evidence available that suggests that accreditation is a major factor for clients selecting a facilitation provider. The accreditation debate is in its infancy in this field and it is unlikely to be advanced without significant industry consultation and agreement about what accreditation should look like; whether there can be a single regulatory body for accreditation (as with Mediation) and what training courses will lead to accreditation.

2. Considering the path to a facilitation ‘profession’

The mediation community and its academic commentators are currently engaged in a debate about whether mediation is a ‘profession’ and, if so, what is the agreed definition and ethical framework in which mediation sits. Scrutiny of current facilitation literature does not appear to identify the same kind of debate within the facilitation community. However, the pressure for professional recognition often emerges from competitive pressures and the desire of professionals to give clients a signal about differentiation. Given the increased competition from growing numbers of trained facilitators, this issue is sure to arise in the foreseeable future.

Suggested reading:

Schwarz, R. (1994) *The Skilled Facilitator*: Wiley Canada
Rixon, A; Rixon, S; McWaters, V. (2006) *Exploring the Language of Facilitation*. Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal, Number 7, 2006

Hunter, D; Bailey, A; Taylor, B. (1994) *The Art of Facilitation*, Tandem Press
Auckland

Hogan, C. (2002) *Understanding Facilitation: Theory and Principles*: London Kogan
Page

Hogan, C. (2003) *Practical Facilitation: A toolkit of techniques*: London Kogan Page

1. See for example: Schwarz, R. 1994 *The Skilled Facilitator*: Wiley Canada – one of the most authoritative authors and practitioners in the field.

2. See AFN.net.au.

3. See Rixon, A; Rixon, S; McWaters, V. (2006) *Exploring the Language of Facilitation*. Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal, Number 7, 2006.

4. See for example <https://education.nsw.gov.au/futures-learning/learning-and-teaching/community-consultation-toolkit/world-cafe-method>.