

Nervous about facilitating a team? Don't stress out. Try the Facilitator Comfort model. It just may reduce your anxiety and improve effectiveness.

The Six Stages Of Facilitator Comfort

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In June 1995, during a four-day Facilitating Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Teams training program, the Stages of Instructor Comfort model was discussed with a group of employees from several Illinois and Missouri hospitals learning facilitation of CQI teams. The content had been originally presented in the early 1980s by Joseph Pictor, former vice president of Methodist Hospital of Indianapolis, as part of an Indiana Society for Healthcare Education and Training annual conference. The content had been revised and updated for use with noneducators.

During the June program, the group realized the content applied to the feelings and concerns of new CQI team facilitators attempting to learn and apply facilitation skills. There was consensus that the "Instructor Comfort" materials should be revised to include "facilitator comfort."

Basic concepts

Experiencing some sweaty palms just thinking about facilitating a team? The Facilitator Comfort model could be a stress-reducing solution for you and your team.

The Facilitator Comfort model can be easily used by educators, noneducators, and quality improvement facilitators to reduce their anxiety and improve effectiveness.

Essentially, in the Facilitator Comfort model there are six stages that involve a continuum from a fear of the unknown and over-concern with self to a lack of concern with self and a blending of the needs of the facilitator, the needs of the team member, an understanding of the CQI process, and a focus on a positive experience for the team member. Since a commonly held component of the facilitator role is as a "Just In Time" trainer, the model appears to have a universal application.

Stage one: Survival

This stage is common to facilitators, and probably easily recognized even without knowledge of this model. It is one that reaches deep into our stomach and emotions. It is frequently one in which thoughts of fight or

flight become real concerns. It can be a stage of joy and exhilaration, as the facilitator anticipates helping a team work through its improvement process. It is also a stage in which the thought of just "getting through" each meeting is common. Questions the new facilitator might ask him or herself include the following. See if any are common to your experience, or if you can think of others.

- *Why am I doing this?*
- *How could I be talked into facilitating this team?*
 - *Can I actually do this facilitation?*
 - *Will the group like me?*
 - *What if I fail?*
 - *Do I have the confidence to do the job?*
 - *Do I have the knowledge? The facilitation skills?*

Some physical manifestations of this stage include:

- Sweaty palms (from either anxiety or excitement).
- Cotton mouth.
- Weak knees.
- Tightness in the chest or other muscles.
- Shallow breath.
- Twitches or spasms, or even nausea.

Feelings may include the following:

- Excitement, enthusiasm.
- Anger or, perhaps, resentment.
- Fear.
- Apprehension.
- Self-doubt.
- Concern.
- Tension.
- Anticipation of a positive experience.

Keys to success include:

- Realizing that I can survive.

- Asking the question, "What is the worst that can happen?"
- Confidence that tension is necessary for success.
- The realization that everyone who facilitates goes through this stage and that a failure to experience tension can cause failure.

The issue is not the tension, but the management of the tension and the knowledge that facilitating is like acting with the end result possibly being a "high" or positive feeling.

Use the positive energy from the anticipation of helping others to get you through the frustrating times.

Stage two: *blame*

This stage is interesting in that it shows a real beginning of movement through the six stages. Clearly the facilitator moves from "me focused" issues of survival to the start of external focus. This is important because strong facilitators recognize that their role is not one of a focus on their needs and issues but on the needs of the team. In this stage, questions the new facilitator might ask him or herself include the following. Any sound familiar?

- *Why did I let that (blankety-blank) get me into this situation?*
- *Why does he/she think I know this stuff?*
- *How will that (so-and-so) pay me back for going through this pain?*
- *How will I get even with him or her?*
- *Does the group like me?*
- *Is the group making progress, moving fast enough?*

Some physical manifestations of this stage include:

- Tension.
- Tight jaw.
- Tight fists.
- An upset stomach.

Feelings may include:

- I will get through this.
- I'll show that (*so-and-so*).
- He/She'll pay.
- Maybe I'm actually getting the hang of this.

With these traits in mind, some keys to moving through this stage include:

- Accepting your feelings of anger and thoughts that you will never do this again (although you will—you always do). In addition, you may develop a positive mental toughness and the knowledge that you have been successful many other times as a facilitator, educator, manager, or professional in other endeavors.
- Focusing on the areas that have been successful so far with this team. One way to do this is to ask the team, "What interventions on your part have been helpful?"

Stage three: *Focus on me*

This stage is essentially a confidence builder for the new facilitator. The need for positive self-talk leads to the confidence and self-analysis required of a strong facilitator. In this stage, questions the new facilitator might ask him or herself include:

- *Am I doing a good job?*
- *What is my role now, as the team gains more self-confidence?*
- *Is it important what others think of me?*
- *How much personal tension is good?*

If you have not facilitated in the past two weeks, making progress and feeling comfortable will take you longer than if you have just done so.

Tension is good and necessary. If you fail to be tense, you risk being less effective than you would like because you may not be crisp, sharp, and focused on your task. Everyone succeeds at facilitation; everyone fails. If you perceive that it is a “bad” team meeting, examine the team meeting process and ask:

- Am I inappropriately interpreting conflict among team members as “bad,” and not recognizing the creative tension that can occur from constructive conflict?
- Was there “special cause” in the meeting (performance that is not normal for this team)?
- How did I misread the team?
- Were my content or interventions appropriate for the team’s process?
- How can I improve the next time?
- Did the person asking me to facilitate give me incomplete information about the team process under study?
- What was going on in the team that created a poor experience, such as resistance to change, hidden agendas, problems with co-workers in the work environment, poor understanding of CQI tools, and leadership or power struggles?
- What’s the worst that can happen? If they don’t like me, that’s OK. I can live through this. I can learn from this.

The problems you encounter have a variety of causes. It is possible some problems have to do with you, but it is equally likely that it is a resistant team, a poor environment, or any one of a number of causes. Remember to look at a team’s work as any other process. There are many common causes, and, to make true improvement, those common causes must be understood and dealt with appropriately.

Also note: a keen sense of humor allows the facilitator not to personalize the issues, but to learn to improve.

- *What’s the worst that can happen? They dislike me—so what? I’m OK.*
- *Why was I so nervous when I started?*

Some physical manifestations of this phase include:

- Tension.
- Leaning forward in your chair more often.
- Feeling “pumped up.”
- Calmness at a gut level.
- Smiling more often.

Common feelings in this stage may be:

- I am good; I think I can do this.
- Excitement.
- I have handled tougher times, I can handle this.
- Competitive.
- Tense, but not over confident.
- Pleasure at seeing the team starting to become successful.

The keys to success in this stage include the:

- Realization that you will not only make it, but that your success will also only come from you. The team needs your insight, knowledge, and skills.
- Recognition that the team can’t hurt you because you won’t let them.
- Realization that you know more than the team.

Stage four: Focus on team and process

The movement from the internal feelings of facilitator to feelings about the needs of the team leader or team starts now. This is a very significant stage in terms of facilitator development.

The key questions or issues of this stage include:

- *Is my facilitation approach and*

style appropriate for the team?

- *Do I know which tool to use at the right time or when to intervene appropriately?*
- *Do my exercises, interventions, or examples illustrate the points I am trying to make?*
- *Can I engage in an appropriate level of discussion?*
- *Do I have the most up-to-date understanding of group dynamics, tools for continuous improvement, and intervention styles?*
- *Was that two traditional adversaries I just saw working together?*

Some of the physical signs or symptoms include:

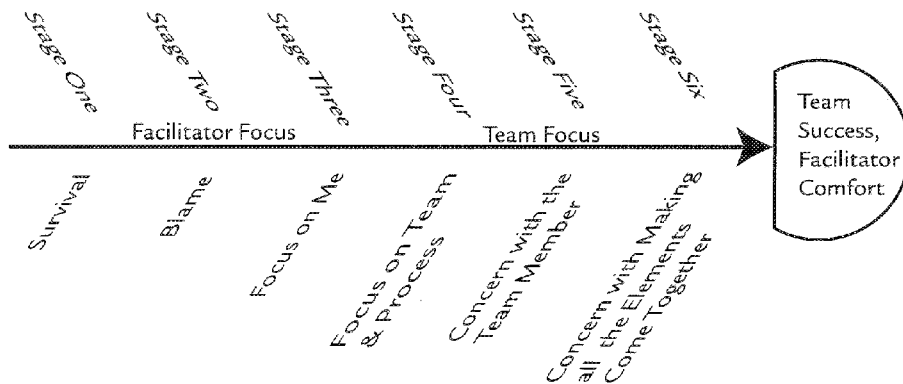
- Cotton mouth.
 - Tightness in muscles.
- (Few other physical symptoms are present because the focus is not on oneself but on the team.)

Some of the feelings experienced by the facilitator include, but are not limited to:

- If I know the CQI process, I will be OK.
- The process is what counts, not the audience.
- I am really worried about my knowledge of the improvement process, so I will over-prepare and then I’ll be OK. (Or, I don’t know the process really well, so I will prepare and prepare so I will know this stuff, then I’ll be OK.)
- It doesn’t matter how I feel as long as the meeting process is all right.

Again, the keys to success may be:

- Knowledge of the improvement process, and confidence gained from your knowledge.
- Not worrying about yourself, but focusing on the meeting process and the team.
- Seeing the team gain



confidence and focusing on its work.

- Realizing that less intervention is OK as the team matures.

Stage Five: Concern with the team member

When the facilitator has moved into this stage, he or she is not me-focused. He or she has made a significant step toward being a strong facilitator.

Questions or issues identified in this stage can and *should* include:

- *What can I do to help the team learn or use the process?*
- *What can I do to help the team better understand the improvement process?*
- *How can I help the team have the best possible experience?*
- *Will the team have fun and still learn or use the process effectively?*
- *How can I combine the best knowledge that I have of the improvement process and create the best team environment?*

Physical signs?

- Some tightness in the stomach. (Few other physical symptoms because the

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focus is not on self, but on the team.)

The feelings experienced are very positive and “other-directed.” They include:

- Compassion.
- Concern for the team and team leader.
- Desire not to disappoint the team or team leader.
- Desire to be a perfect facilitator.
- Not worrying about failure for self, but for others.
- Increased relaxation.

The positive keys to success include:

- Focus on the creation of a positive and supportive team environment, including a focus on the topic and improvement process for *them*.
- Less worry about self.

Stage six: Concern with making all the elements come together (or, The Hannibal Smith Syndrome: “Don’t you love it when a plan comes together?”)

Do you remember the old television program “The A-Team”? In this adventure program George Peppard portrayed Hannibal Smith, the cigar-smoking leader of a band of talented, skilled, and often humorous Vietnam Vets and men of fortune or malcontents who challenged the evil bad guys. At the conclusion of many of the shows, Peppard would take a puff from his cigar and utter those famous words, “Ah, don’t you love it when a plan comes together.”

This same feeling and sentiment occurs when the facilitator recognizes that his or her ultimate goal is to help the team succeed and reach its goal and complete the improvement process. The

facilitator does not worry about self, the process, topic, team leader, or team member. The facilitator is focused and motivated to pull these elements together for the success of the team.

Clearly at this final stage, the questions focus on movement and achievement. Your final concerns:

- *Let’s do it.*
- *Let’s make sure this is the best team experience possible.*
- *I don’t matter, but the best possible team experience is totally my goal.*
- *Let’s give them my best.*
- *This will be a great team.*

Physical signs may include:

- High energy level.
- The appearance of tension or aloofness before, or during, the facilitation.
- A high level of concentration and focus in the eyes.
- Slight tension in the stomach.
- Some dry mouth or sweating—now due to excitement and anticipation.
- Relaxed in your chair, but ready to help (intervene, encourage, or celebrate).

Feelings are very positive and affirming.

- I will give them my best.
- I really want this group process to be a “10.”
- My goal is to pull the team’s needs, the process, and the team environment together so this is a great improvement experience.
- I have to be tense so I do a good job, but my tension isn’t because I am scared.
- I am really focused on the workshop or team, not my needs.
- I will get nervous or worry *after* the program or team meeting.
- Confidence and strong inner peace.

The keys to success at this point:

- Focus on the team leader and the team.
- Management of personal tension.
- Management of the group process environment.
- Focus on the group and improvement process.
- Lack of worry about self or failure.

Although originally developed for educators, the Facilitator Comfort model can easily be implemented by quality improvement facilitators to reduce anxiety and improve effectiveness.

It’s practical, simple, easy to teach, and easy to understand.

Don’t worry, a little upset stomach just may be a sign that you’re moving in the right direction!



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