## The 10 Principles of SMART Facilitation^{tm} – An Overview
(Adapted from *The Secrets of Facilitation*)

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In my first book, *The Secrets of Facilitation*, I described the facilitation methodology we use at Leadership Strategies. SMART Facilitation^{tm}, **S**tructured **M**eeting **a**nd **R**elating **T**echniques, is based on ten principles that provide SMART facilitators with a clear vision of excellence in facilitation. Supporting the principles are specific techniques that demonstrate how SMART facilitators execute the principles in practice.

Let's take a look at each of the ten principles.
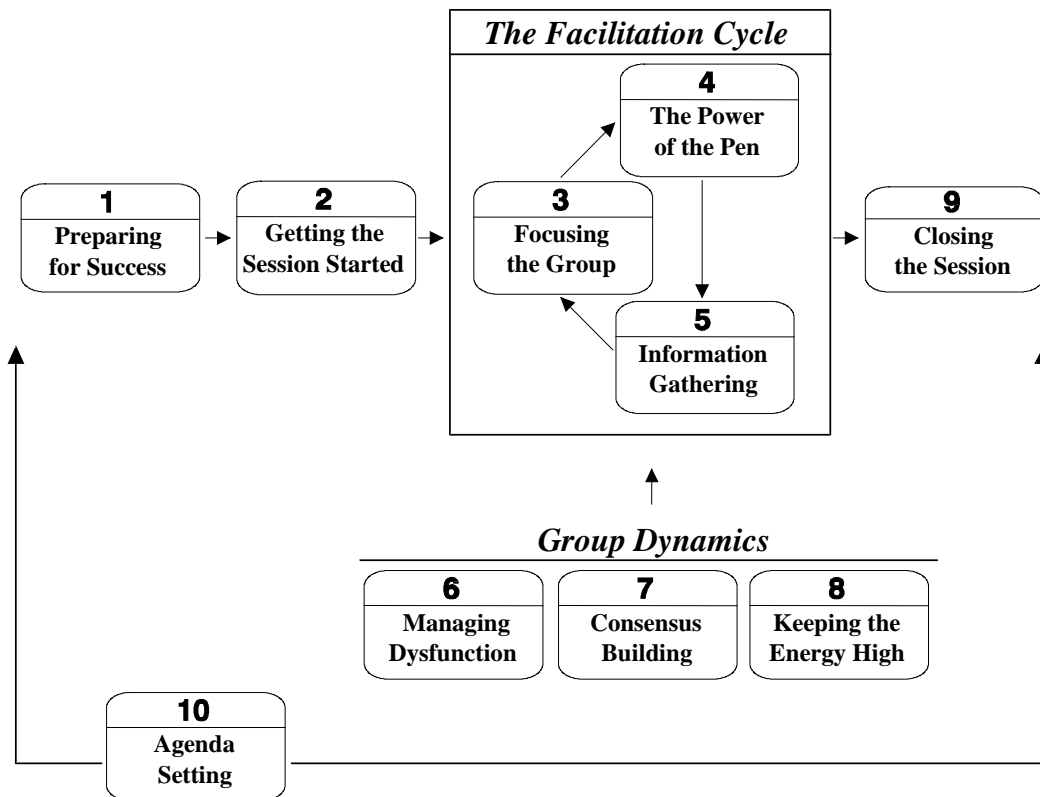
Principle 1. Preparing for Success – Cover all the bases

> SMART facilitators know that preparation is critical for success. They know the questions to ask to fully understand the need and they know the steps to take to get fully prepared to

meet the need. They make sure they understand the 5 Ps of preparation: purpose, product, participants, probable issues and process. This principle answers:

- ❑ What are the most important steps in planning for a facilitated meeting?
- ❑ What are the key questions that you need to have answered?
- ❑ With whom should you speak to get prepared?
- ❑ What do you ask participants about the session?
- ❑ How do you know if you are well prepared?

Principle 2. Getting the Session Started - Inform, excite, empower, involve

SMART facilitators know that the opening of any facilitated session is critical. During this time you set the stage for everything that follows. Start well and the group is ready to work with you to achieve the desired outcome. Start poorly, and you are fighting an uphill battle. Questions answered include:

- ❑ What are the four most important things to do in the opening?
- ❑ How do you get the session started on time?
- ❑ How do you get the participants excited about participating?
- ❑ How do you get buy-in to the agenda?
- ❑ What is the purpose of ground rules?
- ❑ What parking boards should you use?
- ❑ What is the appropriate order of the steps in the opening?

Principle 3. Focusing the Group - Establish the course; avoid detours

Principles 3, 4 and 5 make up the Facilitation Cycle. After getting the session started in the previous principle, you are now ready to begin the first agenda item. You first focus the group (Principle 3), use the power of the pen (Principle 4) and perform information gathering (Principle 5). When you are done with the first agenda item, you go back to focusing the group and go through the cycle for the second agenda item, and so on, until all agenda items are covered.

Principle 3 contains:

- ❑ What should you do at the beginning of every agenda item to get the group focused?
- ❑ When significant time has passed since the last session, how do you restart and get the group focused?
- ❑ How do you avoid asking your first question and getting complete silence?
- ❑ How do you give directions that are accurate, clear and concise?
- ❑ What are techniques for keeping a group on track?

❑ How do you effectively use breakout groups?

❑ What is a way to keep groups focused during report back sessions following breakout groups?

Principle 4. The Power of the Pen - Use it, don't abuse it, make it theirs

Most facilitators aren't aware that they can drive a group dysfunctional simply by abusing the pen. Often facilitators unintentionally devalue a participant's comments by either not recording a remark with which they disagree or waiting until the remark is validated by other people. Other times, they reword the participant's comment, then record the reworded version (tacitly implying that the original words were not good enough!) In time, group members can lose complete ownership over the recorded comments simply because the comments aren't theirs, but instead the facilitator's. Principle 4 covers:

❑ What is the most important information to document from a facilitated session?

❑ How do you avoid abusing the power of the pen?

❑ How do you manage the recording process while still facilitating the group?

❑ What do you do when a participant gives you a long monologue?

❑ How do you prevent lulls while you are writing and trying to catch up?

❑ How do you effectively use a scribe during the session?

❑ What is an appropriate format for the documentation?

Principle 5. Information Gathering – Know your tools and how to use them

SMART facilitators know that the most important tool for a facilitator is questioning. Rather than just using open- and closed-ended questioning techniques, SMART facilitators have a full toolkit of questioning tools, each designed for a specific task. Facilitators must have a wealth of other information gathering and processing tools at their disposal as well in order to address a variety of needs. Some tools are for gathering facts, others for generating ideas, and still other for categorizing, prioritizing, reporting and evaluating. This principle covers the following.

❑ How do you phrase questions that create a bonfire of responses?

❑ How do you use questions to guide a group?

❑ How do you float an idea without unduly influencing the group?

❑ What are the major information gathering and processing functions?

❑ What is the most important thing to do in a brainstorming session?

❑ What are the three critical activities in prioritizing?

❑ How do you maximize Q&A sessions to ensure that the most important questions get asked?

❑ How do you ensure quality feedback during a report back process?

❑ How do you perform an evaluation of the session without the feedback being biased by the comments of one or two people?

While Principles 2-5 lay the flow for a facilitated meeting, Principles 6-8 focus on group dynamics. A facilitator skilled in the techniques covered in Principles 2-5 will understand the mechanics of facilitation. The group dynamics information in Principles 6-8 provides the tools for managing group behavior.

Principle 6. Managing Dysfunction – Conscious Prevention, Early Detection, Clean Resolution

How do you deal with someone who is constantly saying, "No, that won't work. We've tried it before, and it won't work. It's a bad idea. It's not practical. It's not realistic. It just won't work?" What about the people who want to dominate the discussion? Or - just the opposite - the people who sit there and say nothing, until they go out the door and then tell everyone how much a waste of time the meeting was?

Many facilitators fear dysfunctional behavior and seek a wealth of techniques to address dysfunction should it occur. However, SMART facilitators know that the key to dysfunction is to address it **before** it occurs (conscious prevention), detect it early if it does happen (early detection) and cleanly resolve it so that it goes away for good (clean resolution). Through this principle you learn:

❑ What is dysfunctional behavior?

❑ How do you identify dysfunctional potential during the preparation stage?

❑ What are strategies you can take prior to the session to prevent dysfunctional behavior from occurring?

❑ What are the needs and typical dysfunctions of the different communication styles?

❑ How do you detect dysfunction early?

❑ How do you address some of the more common dysfunctions such as the drop-out, the nay-sayer, the whisperer, the verbal attacker?

❑ What do you do when something unexpected happens in a session, such as an emotional outburst?

❑ How should you respond when one or more participants indicate you have made a mistake or suggest a change to the process that you don't want to make?

Principle 7. Consensus Building – Create and maintain a consensus-focused process

SMART facilitators know that, in terms of consensus building, the good news is that people disagree for only three reasons. However, SMART facilitators also know the bad news: if you use an inappropriate consensus building strategy, you will likely fail. For, level-3 disagreements can't be solved by a level-1 technique, and level-1 disagreements can't be solved by a level-2 technique. SMART facilitators know the three reasons people disagree and they have consensus building tools for addressing each one. This principle answers:

- What is the definition of consensus?
- Why might full consensus not be the recommended approach for group decision-making?
- What are the three reasons people disagree?
- How do you address a disagreement in which the argument appears to be irrational?
- How do you slow down a conversation to ensure that everyone is getting the facts?
- How do you resolve a disagreement based on different values or experiences?

Principle 8. Keeping the Energy High - Set the pace, anticipate the lulls, react accordingly

Whether you are leading a single two-hour meeting or a series of half-day meetings, a degree of energy is essential to keeping the group interested and engaged. This principle answers:

- What is the impact of energy on the session topic, the session participants, and the participants' view of the facilitator?
- How do you start a session with energy?
- How do you maintain energy throughout a session?
- What are the lullaby times during the day and what should a you do about them?
- When are team building activities appropriate? How do you use them well?

Principle 9. Closing The Session - Review, evaluate, end, debrief

Often meetings end without a clear understanding of what was accomplished or what will happen going forward. SMART facilitators know that, in closing a session, it is important that everyone is clear on what was done, the benefits of what was done, the actions to take place once the meeting is over, and the method for ensuring that the actions were accomplished. This principle includes answers to:

- What are the most important activities to do before closing a session?
- What do you do with the participants' personal objectives identified at the beginning of the session?
- How do you ensure buy-in and commitment to the decisions made in the meeting?
- What do you do with the items remaining on the Issues List?
- What are guidelines for assigning responsibility for the Action List?
- What feedback is needed from the team and the sponsor of the meeting?
- What do you do if it looks like you are going to exceed the scheduled ending time?

Principle 10. Agenda Setting – Adapt your agenda to address the need

The last principle ends at the beginning, with constructing agendas using the techniques covered in the other principles. This principle answers:

- ❑ What is a standard agenda and why do you need it?
- ❑ How do you customize a standard agenda to meet a specific need?
- ❑ How do you create an agenda from scratch?
- ❑ How do you ensure that you know your process cold?
- ❑ How does an agenda differ from a detailed facilitation guide?
- ❑ What should be included in a facilitation guide?
- ❑ How do you estimate time?

Together, the principles and techniques comprise a comprehensive methodology for SMART Facilitation^{tm} that can be used to produce consistent, repeatable results.

Interested in learning the 100+ techniques for putting SMART Facilitation^{tm} into practice? Check out our course, _The Effective Facilitator_.

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