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Facilitated Workshops

FACILITATED WORKSHOP: An elicitation technique using focused sessions that bring key cross-functional (from different groups) Stakeholders together to **define** cross-functional requirements. A very effective way to problem solve, resolve issues, or get a consensus. User stories, which are short, textual descriptions of required functionality, are often developed in a facilitated workshop. These user stories describe the Stakeholder who benefits (role), the Stakeholder need (goal), and the benefit (motivation.

9.1 Introduction

As organisations and information become more complex, it is no longer possible or sensible to rely on one person to make all the decisions. More and more, organisations achieve success (or not) through the behaviours and interactions of other people. Understanding or influencing people by exerting hierarchical power is becoming less common than by consultation and direct relationships. As a result, enabling people to interact better in a group repays enormous dividends. Facilitated Workshops have proved to be a most efficient and effective way of achieving this.

Facilitated Workshops are a specialised type of meeting, with a clear objective (product), a set of people (participants) who are chosen and empowered to produce the product and an independent person (facilitator) to enable the effective achievement of the objective.

Facilitated Workshops are a process in which a neutral facilitator, with no stake in the outcome of the workshop, enables a group to work together to achieve an agreed goal, whether that be solving a problem, building a plan, gathering requirements or making a decision or consensus. Facilitated Workshops ensure a team-based approach to rich communication and collaboration and achieve results with speed and commitment and buy-in to the outcome. Enabling people to communicate and collaborate effectively pays enormous dividends.

Facilitated Workshops are an extremely efficient and effective way of achieving this enhanced communication. More and more, organisations achieve success through enabling teamwork and interaction through Facilitated Workshops.

Facilitated Workshops are a proven technique. They are used successfully throughout the business world and have been used in systems development, in particular, for many years. They are a way of making high quality team-based decisions in compressed timescales. They can be used throughout the project lifecycle wherever embracing several viewpoints at the same time is advantageous, e.g. when capturing and prioritising requirements, creating plans and strategies, modelling cross-functional business processes and reviewing an increment.

Facilitated Workshops are also a useful catalyst for effecting cultural change in an organisation. This is because workshops promote buy-in, necessitate empowerment of the participants and require individuals to take responsibility and honour their commitments.

9.2 Benefits

Using Facilitated Workshops brings both direct and indirect benefits to a project.

* Rapid, high quality decision-making – Facilitated Workshops can reduce the elapsed time required to achieve objectives, such as the identification, agreement and sign-off of requirements. Because all relevant stakeholders are present at the same time and able to communicate and collaborate effectively with each other, they will have greater confidence in the result. The group is focused on the objectives to be achieved in the session so that the information gathering and review cycle is performed with greater speed. Also, misunderstandings and disagreements are made visible and can be worked out at the time, in a safe environment managed by the facilitator. Any concerns should therefore have been raised and resolved, or noted for action after the workshop, with appropriate people assigned as owners.
* Greater buy-in from all stakeholders – Facilitated Workshops lead to participants feeling more involved and committed to the end results due to having an opportunity to participate in, and contribute to, both the content and the decisions that are made. This builds and helps maintain enthusiasm throughout the project.
* Building team spirit – As well as delivering results, Facilitated Workshops are a managed way of building rapport across the community. The output of the workshop benefits from the participants building on each other’s ideas and gaining a better understanding of each other’s viewpoints. A successful Workshop depends on high levels of synergy being achieved and it is a major part of the Workshop Facilitator role to ensure that this happens.
* Building Consensus – The Facilitated Workshop provides an opportunity for participants to discuss the relevant subject matter, including the major issues and problems, and reach a consensus on important decisions. If business procedures and practices are reviewed, participants can gain a greater understanding of the inputs and implications of their work. This can lead to improved efficiencies, led by the participants themselves, giving greater buy-in and commitment and therefore a greater chance of successful implementation.
* Clarification of issues – Workshops help to minimise ambiguities and misunderstandings. In the facilitated environment, participants can explore and model ideas, which in turn will simplify and accelerate the review and sign-off of the workshop deliverables.



9.3 Managing the Workshop

9.3.1 The Process

This is how the group of people will achieve the objective. It is the responsibility of the Workshop Facilitator to design and amend the process to assist the group in achieving its objective.

There are a many great tools and techniques that may be used in workshops. Physically gathering, modelling and presenting information needs to use tools to help workshop participants see this information. A whiteboard, flipchart, brown paper and sticky notes are commonly used tools. Techniques are the practices used to achieve the workshop aims and include such things are brainstorming, storyboards, rich pictures, SWOT analysis, grouping and diagramming.

9.3.2 The Dynamic

The group dynamic is about how people interact together, their relationships and feelings displayed by their behaviour. This is the organic part of any group interaction. Systems and procedures do not take account of human beings with their fears, hopes, aspirations and feelings. The Workshop Facilitator’s role is to manage the people through the process towards achieving the goal. Typically, this will mean making sure that individuals or factions do not dominate; ensuring shy people with valuable input are heard; ensuring discussion around issues is productive and does not become emotive or personal and focusing the group on what they should be doing. It is the responsibility of the Workshop Facilitator to try to create the appropriate dynamic for differing situations, such as problem solving, creativity, conflict resolution or strategic thinking and to identify and manage the dynamic operating within the group. Other matters that can affect the dynamic are internal politics, pay and conditions, room layout, length of meeting, refreshments, seating and lighting. Some are within the Workshop Facilitator’s control, some are capable of influence, but all need to be facilitated.

9.4 Roles

This section gives some guidance on the roles of a workshop. Facilitated Workshop roles are defined as being Workshop Owner, Workshop Facilitator, Participants, Co-facilitator, Workshop Scribe, and Observer.

9.4.1 Workshop Owner

This is the owner of the objective that the workshop is aiming to achieve and usually the owner of the budget to run the workshop. It is up to the owner to set the objectives and deliverables of the workshop, although the Workshop Facilitator should help the owner in clarifying and scoping these. The workshop objectives should also be understood and agreed by the participants at the start of the workshop. The owner of a project kick-off workshop may be the Business Sponsor, whereas the owner of a Planning workshop could be the Project Manager, Team Leader or even the Business Ambassador. What is important is that the owner is involved in the definition and resourcing of the workshop and retains ownership of the objective throughout the workshop.

9.4.2 Workshop Facilitator

The Workshop Facilitator manages the process and dynamic of the workshop, enabling the participants to concentrate on the content and the product. The Workshop Facilitator should be neutral to the workshop objectives, the product (outcome) of the workshop and the participants. He/she is responsible for helping the group to meet the workshop objectives. Ideally the Workshop Facilitator should come from outside the project to ensure – and signify – neutrality. Some organisations have internal facilitators that are allocated to workshops and other organisations employ external consultants.

The Workshop Facilitator’s skills and abilities include:

* listening effectively and accurately
* summarising
* observing and recalling conversation and behaviour
* communicating clearly
* identifying similarities and differences between statements
* recognising and understanding different viewpoints and perspectives
* analysing
* identifying assumptions
* recognising effective and ineffective behaviour
* intervening appropriately as necessary
* being a model of effective behaviour
* providing feedback impartially and tactfully
* accepting feedback calmly
* being in control of own behaviour
* developing trust with and within groups

9.4.3 Participant

A participant is chosen because they are needed to produce the product or achieve the objectives of the workshop. Participants must add value to the workshop. To do this they need to have the knowledge, skills and experience to be able to contribute to the objective of the workshop and be empowered to make decisions if that is what the workshop demands of the group. Group facilitation is a lean process so only the people essential to achieving the objectives and deliverables should be there. A participant could perform one of many roles within the business and may include suppliers or customers from outside the organisation.

9.4.4 Observer

Observer is a requested role, rather than a necessary role for the production of the workshop’s immediate product. Examples of the use of the Observer role are therefore limited but could include someone auditing the workshop process or the facilitator’s ability; a trainee facilitator who wants to observe the group dynamics without being part of the group; an auditor to the project processes. Observers could also be development or support staff gathering useful background information. In all cases, the Observer’s presence must be agreed by the Workshop Owner and the group. Observers will always affect the dynamic of the workshop, altering the behaviour and input of the participants, even if they do not speak or interact directly. If it is absolutely necessary to allow an Observer to the workshop process, they should not contribute towards the content, process or deliverables of the workshop. If they need to take an active part, they should be invited and acknowledged as participants.

9.4.5 Co-facilitator

The Co-facilitator works alongside the Workshop Facilitator, where appropriate, to help record the visible workshop documentation. This may be captured on flipcharts, boards, handwritten notes or directly onto a computer using standard word processing, graphics packages or specialist group systems software. The latter enables the involvement of remote participants via tele- or video-conferencing. The Co-facilitator also performs the valuable task of monitoring the group dynamic and feeding back any observations to the lead facilitator. The role should be held by another facilitator, or possibly a Business Analyst, Solution Developer or user; in short, someone who has the required understanding, both of the workshop issues and of facilitation, in order to know what to record and what to observe and feed back to the lead facilitator.

9.4.6 Workshop Scribe

The Scribe records and publishes the workshop outcomes and decisions, together with any necessary supporting information. The Scribe may also take responsibility for following up agreed actions with those who took ownership of these during the workshop itself. The Scribe role may be held by anyone who has the required understanding of the issues, in order to know what to record. To support or speed up the process there may be more than one person allocated to this role in a workshop, depending on how the outputs are being documented (for example, sometimes a Technical Scribe is used where documentation is to be created directly into a specific toolset).

9.5 Facilitated Workshop Activities

The key activities associated with a Facilitated Workshop are:

* Plan the workshop (Workshop Definition)
* Prepare for the workshop
* Facilitate the Workshop Session
  + Run the workshop
  + Review the workshop
* Document the workshop (Workshop Report)
* Follow-up (Post-Workshop Actions and Review)

9.5.1 Plan the Workshop (Workshop Definition)

The Workshop Owner, with support from the Workshop Facilitator, defines the objectives of the workshop, nominates the participants and agrees, in outline, the form that the workshop should take. It may sometimes be necessary to define several workshops to achieve the objectives. The size of the workshop should ideally be in the range of six to twelve people (more can be accommodated if necessary, but additional planning and structure will be required, which may possibly include the use of extra co-facilitators and the breaking of the workshop into sub-groups).

9.5.2 Prepare for the Workshop

In preparation for the workshop, the Workshop Facilitator or Co-facilitator must circulate information to the participants in advance so that they fully understand the objective of the workshop and the background to it. The workshop agenda detailing when, where and who will be attending, as well as the order of proceedings, will be sent out, together with any pre-workshop reading. In particular, individuals will be advised where their input to the workshop is needed so that they may prepare the information that they need to make an effective contribution and where necessary collect the views of those they are representing.

9.5.3 Facilitate the Workshop – Run the Workshop

The workshop needs to maintain its focus and pace. Some Workshop Facilitators operate on the principle of the five-minute rule wherein any disagreement that cannot be resolved in a period of five minutes is parked as an ‘open issue’. Such open issues are documented and deferred to a later session or possibly taken outside the workshop for resolution. For workshops to be effective, there are a few basic guidelines which the Workshop Facilitator should agree with the group and remind people of, should it become necessary. Typical guidelines (ground rules) are:

* start on time – as timescales are constrained
* respect the views of others
* silence may be seen as agreement – if participants do not speak up then they will be assumed to have agreed the point under discussion
* one conversation at a time
* each individual in the group has a responsibility to maintain focus.

9.5.4 Facilitate the Workshop – Review the Workshop

The effectiveness of the workshop should to be examined before the end of the workshop and any lessons learned fed back into the operation of future workshops. In particular, did the workshop meet its objectives fully and did all participants contribute to the process? Most importantly, how effective did the participants feel that the workshop had been and did it run to time?

9.5.5 Document the Workshop

The Workshop Scribe should produce and distribute a Workshop Report very soon after the workshop, to all participants and, if appropriate, to other interested parties who will be affected by the products of the workshop. The Workshop Report should be brief and should document:

* decisions
* actions with action owners
* open issues
* the product of the workshop itself, as appropriate

The Workshop Report does not record minutes.

9.5.6 Follow-up

The Workshop Owner must be consulted to confirm satisfaction with the workshop’s results. All actions marked for follow-up activity outside the workshop forum must be addressed, not just documented!

9.6 Success Factors for Facilitated Workshops

The factors which have been found, in practice, to greatly improve the success of Facilitated Workshop are:

* an effective, trained, independent Workshop Facilitator
* flexibility in the format of different workshops, but clearly defined objectives
* thorough preparation before the workshop by Workshop Facilitator, Co-facilitator and Participants
* a mechanism for ensuring that the results of previous workshops are built in, where appropriate
* decisions and agreements that are not forced. If the workshop participants cannot agree on a point within the workshop (perhaps due to lack of information or time), the Workshop Facilitator should recognise this and elicit from the group the appropriate action to remedy the shortfall
* participants receiving a workshop report, detailing decisions, actions and the product of the workshop, very soon after the workshop (ideally within 48 hours)

Much can be learned by scheduling a short review session just before the end of each workshop and documenting the benefits and concerns from the workshop.