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The Manager as a Facilitator

In this article, the author strives to describe the role of a manager–facilitator in the context of his or her function within a contemporary organization. In making reference to one of the most important needs of “personal and professional development” found among employees, the author demonstrates the universal utility of the professional facilitator in supporting such development. An important part of the article is the “Facilitator in Action” chapter, which is a practical illustration of the functioning of the manager–facilitator in a design team crisis situation. The premises examined in the article are well documented in light of cited scientific research, where detailed descriptions may be found in the rich overview of scientific literature.

The need for personal and professional development as well as the potential for its realization in the work place is important for people working in various positions on all levels of the organization. The satisfaction of these important needs is a major source of worker motivation [Allen, 1996; Heron, 1999; Handy, 1999; Denny, 1999; Mądry, Niemczyk, Szczepanik, 2005]. Thus, if work is to become the real arena for universal employee development, then the manager should fill the role of facilitator—the person making the achievement of designated development tasks possible as well as easier [Heron, 2002].

At the start of any consideration, worth remembering is the fact that *facilitation*, a known term, involves universal support in the development of participants in a group as well as making effective learning possible for them through the solving of various tasks and problems. Its objective should be the active and conscious joining in of participants in activities in a manner giving them the potential for all–encompassing (emotional, intellectual, and physical) involvement in the process underway. For his or her part, the facilitator should be a person who makes it possible for them to arrive at the best solutions in a relatively independent (autonomous) manner thanks to various interventions (techniques) [Heron, 1992, 1999, 2004].

It should be remembered that it is not the job of the facilitator to eliminate or mollify difficulties inherent in the nature of the process of learning and development, as this is, in fact, an impossible task. The opposite is true. The role of the professional facilitator is the confronting of participants with various difficult situations (including conflicts, crises, difficult problems to solve) and creating for them the possibility of developing themselves thanks to just such challenges [Little, 2001]. Thus, it is important for the facilitator to demonstrate complete and deep faith in the development potential of man, immanent in his nature [Rogers, Frieberg, 1993].

Practice shows that the decided bulk of groups, task forces, and design teams working on difficult and complex tasks need the help of professional facilitators [Burns, Halprin, 1974; Heron, 1990, 1993, 1999].

The taking up of this arduous role of facilitator is one of many important challenges put before managers by the modern organization.

In order to be able to surmount such challenges, managers must grasp the art of facilitation thanks to which they will effectively support the development of their subordinates. What competencies should be developed and perfected to be able to professionally serve in the role of manager–facilitator? How should the organization support them on the path to such development?

However, before one defines the competencies and specifies the role of the manager–facilitator, it is necessary to point out the major differences between personal development undertaken in various types of development groups (training, interpersonal, and personal development) and development achieved in the work place (individually and in teams).

Thus, the most important and overriding objective of action in the development group is the development of personality realized through in–depth work on oneself, ultimately leading to significant internal changes in the individual and often (indirectly) in the whole group. This means that other individual objectives relating to the group’s operations in the external world (in the professional or social environment, for example) are secondary and achieved at a later date.

In the work place, for its part, the main and primary aim of employee actions comes down to achieving visible and tangible effects (measurable results!) as defined by the organization. Personal worker development thus becomes a secondary objective, albeit it has a significant impact on the employee’s professional development as well as efficiency in professional activities [Heron, 1993, 2002].

It is no exaggeration to state that the manager–facilitator who knows how to support his or her subordinates in their professional and personal development is extremely needed and plays an important part in both growth in business results and in the high level of worker motivation in an organization managed in a modern way. The man-

ager–facilitator’s role is also to make possible and ease participation in decisions, in expressing needs, and in supporting interests and aspirations. The perceiving and respecting of employee needs and rights serves to make the organization a friendly place for workers that really offers development possibilities. If the organization is “dehumanized” and a hierarchically bureaucratized monolith, then it shall have to face such problems as difficulties in the efficient management of people, a fall in work output, and a sense of alienation among working personnel [Heron, 2002; Handy, 1985; Garratt, 1987].

Prerequisite to changing such a situation can be—as suggested by John Heron—an “organizational revolution,” whose purpose should be not only the respecting of employee rights, but also the creation of real possibilities for people for satisfying their development needs. Faced with such a challenge, the role of a facilitator and the need for effective facilitation in organizations are beyond any need for discussion [Heron, 2002].

The Need for Facilitation

The essence of a manager’s effective action should not be limited to inspiring and motivating people, as well as skillfully directing a team and overseeing its work, but also to solve complex and difficult problems together with subordinates and implement the mutually developed solutions. Such a situation makes facilitating an important need of the employee team as well as a real challenge for the manager.

The role and task of a professional facilitator is not the delivery of ready solutions, but making it possible for participants, those involved in the task, to look for various ideas to efficiently solve the problem. The challenge facing the manager–facilitator is often this: He or she is not only to help subordinates to define and understand the objective of action, but also ease the finding and development of ways to achieve targets. He or she should also remember that the path to finding new solutions is more important to employee development than the solution itself [Schon, 1983]. In practice, this signifies consent and encouragement to experiment with new, as yet unknown, ways of solving the problem. Such an approach to a task develops worker creativity, enriches their knowledge, and makes possible a looking at the problem from various perspectives.

And finally, the manager–facilitator should strive to reach a moment in which his or her subordinates find the solution to the task themselves, if possible under the given situation. Reaching this goal may prove to be a key to employee development, because a real sense of co–ownership of the solution means that they will implement what they achieved themselves with greater willingness and efficiency [Argyris, Schon, 1978; Heron, 2002]. It may be hoped that more and more managers start to appreciate just such a style of facilitation, because its benefits are obvious: more implemented solutions and progress in employee development.

The Effective Facilitator

One of the key competency requirements placed before managers by an organization is flexibility in using various facilitation and management styles (flexible management) [Heron, 2002]. This means that a manager should be capable of consciously selecting various styles—styles that are adequate to the situation. For example, he or she should know when and in what manner to take an independent decision, when it should be consulted with the team, and when it should be delegated to the team, allowing it greater autonomy of action. Such flexibility in using various styles is fundamental to the concept of the manager–facilitator supporting the development of subordinates [Heron, 2002]. As claimed by Heron, it is thanks to this flexibility that it is possible to mutually reconcile four elements:

- Personal employee autonomy,
- The authority and power of the manager,
- Organizational requirements, and
- Benefits for the external world (customers and social environment).

A successive, important competency of the efficient manager–facilitator is the ability to motivate subordinates—in other words, to cause them to feel a real desire to work as well as be involved in the work.

As is known, motivation to work has its source in satisfying a worker’s most important needs. In order to be able to satisfy them adequately, the manager should be familiar with the various needs of subordinates. The most recent Polish studies [Mądry, Niemczyk, Szczepanik, 2005] demonstrate that a combination of two factors in the extra–material sphere motivate employees most:

- Offering them development possibilities (including training, coaching, advances, participation in new and interesting projects, and post–graduate studies), and
- Guarantying them a sense of security (creating certainty of employment for them, foreseeable events, etc.).

Without satisfying these two needs it would be difficult to motivate the bulk of people, according to the study authors. Taking into account these motivational factors, the effective manager–facilitator will try to create perspectives of long–term development as well as a real sense of security among his or her subordinates.

The very same research states that regardless of how much workers make, they want to be similarly motivated in the non–material sphere. In addition to development potential and job security, they rate appreciation for involvement and success, good atmosphere in the work place, and clearly specified objectives as important.

Another, equally important competency of a manager should be skill in managing the various emotions to which both the manager and subordinates are subject. Work on emo-

tions as stemming from conflicts and tension in the team, for example, should be a constant element to be noted and worked on by the manager. Neglecting this sphere may significantly lower work efficiency in the team [Heron, 2002]. The building of good relations in the team is fostered by such factors as empathy and a friendly approach with respect to oneself, feedback, acceptance and understanding of personality differences (various types of preferences), as well as tolerance and openness with respect to oneself.

With respect to the mentioned emotional and interpersonal aspects, depending on needs, the manager and his or her team can utilize support by professional trainers–facilitators from outside the organization. Training perfecting the art of facilitation, special supervision, and what is known as “live facilitation” (support in solving conflicts or other problems facing the team, for example) are the most frequently met forms of outside help for managers and their teams. An open stance with respect to such assistance is indicated, especially when the manager is personally strongly involved in solving the task and lacks the necessary distance with respect to problems found within the team. In such a case, the role of facilitator should be assumed by someone from outside the team who, standing on the sidelines, can make it possible for the entire team to go through the process of reaching the best solution.

The task facing such an external facilitator (not necessarily an expert in the given field or specialization) is primarily making participants aware of just what their problem involves. The next phase is inspiring the team to go beyond stereotypes and schematic thinking by supplying it with techniques for creative problem solving. Furthermore, aid in developing the best solutions and their implementation is no less important.

The involvement of an outside facilitator may prove worthwhile to the organization for two reasons. Firstly, it can lead to a quick and efficient solving of the problem. Secondly, the manager heading the team will have an opportunity to learn the art of facilitation “in real time” from the facilitator.

In looking at the effectiveness of actions on the part of facilitators, worth remembering is the fact that, in practice, they do not demonstrate any single, common, and closed set of behaviors and skills that when invariably applied in a given place and time guaranty high effectiveness of their actions. The opposite is actually true. It seems that the very same facilitators often apply various behaviors and interventions in different groups, even when they are dealing with the same type of group behavior. Also noticeable is the fact that the same facilitators take on various behaviors in the same group with respect to the same group activities appearing in various times. This signifies that varying behavior and intervention on the part of the facilitator applied in similar situations in the same group at various times may be equally effective.

Thus, it seems that the real secret in effective facilitation lies in these seeming “contradictions” that are observable in the practice of facilitators [Thiagarajan, 1998, 1999].

Apart from the dynamics of group behavior and the above mentioned “contradictions,” effective facilitators may be characterized as having the following psychological competencies [Thiagarajan, 1998]:

- They are flexible in actions, which means that they modify their actions during various phases of work in the group and change them depending on the situation and time;
- They can quickly tune in on and adapt to the character of the situation, which they do all of the time, regardless of emotional concentration and stresses in group relations;
- They are proactive, which means that prior to commencing action, they adapt and modify their behavior depending on professional specifics and objectives of the actions of the group;
- They are responsive to changes and quickly react to all unforeseen changes in the situation in the group;
- They are open to what happens, demonstrating resilience, reacting positively and constructively to various difficult situations (failures, mistakes, defeat, etc.), treating them as something valuable and important signals in the group process.

Thanks to the conscious application of the above competencies, effective facilitators demonstrate significant flexibility in the realm of the following aspects of group work:

- Activity structure (from complete control over rules, through neutrality, to a free flow),
- Work rate (from very rapid, through moderate, to slow),
- Internal group interaction (from collaboration to rivalry),
- Concentration on what is important at the given moment (concentration on the process or the effects of action),
- Notice of the needs of group members (individual and group), and
- Control over quality and directions of group activity (from autonomous and intra-group to external as performed by the group leader).

Such skills making possible unhindered and flexible movement among the many poles and tensions present within the group mean that the actions of the facilitator will support and improve the effectiveness of group actions. An absence of such flexibility often leads to crisis and a drop in the efficiency of group work [Thiagarajan, 1998, 1999].

The Facilitator in Action

Looking at a concrete example, let us try to analyze the actions of a manager-facilitator (heading a major project) who is facing a serious crisis in the design team.

As a result of analysis, it turns out that the main cause of the crisis was significant diversity of preferred personality types among team members. This generated many conflicts because some people worked on the project more slowly while others were quicker,

some kept to the plan and identified topics too rigorously while others preferred more spontaneity and an open action style. When meeting halfway down the road, those who were more organized (“judging” according to the MBTI typology) reacted with concern with respect to those who were more spontaneous and preferred open options (“perceiving”), saying: “You are constantly behind and can’t keep to the schedule. The deadline is fast approaching, hurry up or we won’t make it! Delays can cost us too much.”

What happened at this point was a significant change in the design as it turned out that it was necessary to improve certain solutions in the new product. This is when the group with greater spontaneity that was “late” said: “See, why were you in such a hurry? Now we have to slow down and move deadlines because of the changes.” This change heated up the conflict in the team even more. It freed new emotions—fear and aggression—and raised the level of stress among those in favor of a more rigid structure and keeping deadlines (“judging”).

As can be seen, the polarization of these two different action styles resulted in conflicts and tension in the team. At the same time, it threatened the timeliness of project completion.

Faced with this situation, what did the manager–facilitator do? First and foremost, he encouraged the team to accept the fact that work by various people at various rates is a natural phenomenon that in no way has to lower the efficiency of action. Secondly, he made the team aware of the fact that a flexible and open position with respect to change may prove to be a key to better quality of the product they were working on jointly. Thirdly, he moved the deadline by a few days, thus eliminating the significant pressure of the time factor and its resultant excessive anxiety in the case of a part of the team.

Thanks to these actions, the facilitator brought about a situation in which the conflict was settled and the team’s psychological tension was eliminated. This made possible further effective work in spite of existing differences in terms of personal preferences.

The above example shows that in spite of major differentiation in preference types within a team as well as the potential for conflict, its efficiency of action can be high [Briggs, Myers, 1977; Hirsh, 1992]. Thus, the role of the manager–facilitator is making team members aware of the fact that full understanding, acceptance, and awareness of differences in terms of personality preferences are the key to team development.

As can be seen, the art of effective facilitation, which is so very much needed in the organizations of today, creates the perspective of a new look at the above mentioned differences as a source of creative potential for individuals and teams [Couprie, 1998; Meyer, 2003; Wideman, 2003].

Thus, an aware manager–facilitator should be perfectly conscious of the fact that the success of a team is a difficult and major challenge as it forces the team to face a conundrum of complex events. Personality differences (various types of preferences) as well as

intercultural ones, and various styles of action and learning can cause conflicts and destroy the efficiency of team action. In order to be able to manage such threats, the manager–facilitator should not only master the art of facilitation, but should also better know both subordinates as well as his or herself (preference types, strengths and weaknesses). In practice, this means that the manager–facilitator should care for his or her personal and professional development, because it is only then that he or she shall be ready to achieve real success as well as manage failures that do not have to turn into defeat.

Development Potential

Managers interested in mastering the art of facilitation should be aware of the fact that the process of training facilitators is long and multi–phased. It encompasses such aspects as psychological work on oneself, expanding knowledge (learning about various facilitation models, the theory of group processes, team development dynamics, etc.), the mastering of new practical skills (facilitation methods and techniques), and the development of appropriate stances (including openness, flexibility, neutrality, and acceptance).

The facilitator is a person whose role is to support people in the process of learning and development so as to involve them in tasks, while simultaneously helping them take responsibility for their performance [compare Heron, 2002]. The essence of facilitation, as mentioned, is to make the process of learning and developing easier, which in no way means simplifying tasks, forwarding ready solutions, or eliminating challenges. It is rather the inspiring of people to undertake active, creative, and responsible actions.

A key aspect of the actions of an effective facilitator, again as mentioned, is not only assisting subordinates in finding the best solutions, but also understanding the basic truth that the most important objective of the facilitator’s actions should be a striving to increasingly higher levels of personality development—his or her own and that of subordinates.

They should also know how to respect the uniqueness, diversity, autonomy, and internal integrity of the people he or she helps in development [Heron, 2002].

A factor that cannot be bypassed in the development process of every facilitator—especially a manager–facilitator—is the authority he or she wields as well as his or her relatively high rank in the organization. A lack of awareness of power held often leads to its abuse, which consequently can lead to conflict within the team and a lowering of the efficiency of its actions. A manager’s authority is tied with decision making. Thus, it is not without significance if all of the authority is concentrated in the manager’s hands and therefore the manager forces through his or her arbitrary decisions on the team or if he or she shows flexibility and consults decisions with the team, also allowing for complete decision autonomy under certain conditions [Heron, 2002].

In order to evade the mentioned mistakes and threats, the manager–facilitator should be regularly subjected to oversight, be open to feedback from the team, and in certain cases take part in special coaching sessions.

Moreover, training in the art of facilitation may be good support for facilitators (“The Role of the Facilitator” and “The Art of Facilitation,” for example) where it is possible to develop and improve practical and theoretical competencies [Little, 2001].

A universal standard at many European and American universities is the providing of special classes (one or two year modules) that offer students specialization in the art of facilitation. The benefits of these good and tested models are worth considering in preparing and implementing such programs at Polish schools.

Challenges for the Future

Today’s revolution in adult education and development is responsible for radical changes in theory and practice, and has placed many new challenges in front of teachers, trainers, managers, facilitators, and their subordinates [Knowles, 1980; Bond, 1988; Heron, 1993, 2002].

The most important of these are:

- Learning should not be perceived as a process of arbitrary transfer of knowledge and the performing of various tasks for the learners, but rather as a process of facilitation fostering their autonomy and internal development;
- The main responsibility for the effects of learning and development rest with both the learners and their teachers;
- The process of learning and development should encompass the multiplicity of independent forms that are, in fact, complementary with respect to each other and provide mutual support, they are:
 - Learning practical skills and using them in various day–to–day situations and professional activities (practical learning)
 - Learning about the theory and concept of the *case study* as well as its intellectual analysis, which makes possible an understanding of observed phenomenon, expanding knowledge, deepening reflection, and developing critical examination of investigated reality (conceptual learning)
 - Employing the functions of intuition and imagination that supply creativity and an all–encompassing look at the problem, while simultaneously allowing for the discovery of hidden meanings found in symbols and metaphors (imaginal learning)
 - Learning through experience, enriching the wealth of experience of learners to include new areas and unique experiences (emotion and feeling), supplementing the process of learning and discovering reality (experiential learning)

■ The learner is an autonomous, integral, and unique person who needs to take part in the process of learning and development in a complete and all-encompassing way, which stems from the fact that effective learning and personality development necessitate the simultaneous involvement of the intellectual and emotional spheres, an awareness of positions, and active participation in interpersonal relations (personal and team) as well as social relations, where spiritual development making reference to the world of values professed by the person are not without significance.

What we have observed recently is that the contemporary organization is undertaking challenges aimed at a fuller and more efficient development of workers with increasing frequency and willingness. They are also investing in the process of preparing the professional manager-facilitator because they are key persons in creating a new facilitation culture. Whether or not the organization will become a true arena for worker development is primarily dependent on them.

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