
Understanding the Fundamental Secret of Facilitation

(Adapted from *The Secrets of Facilitation*)

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Professional facilitators know a powerful secret.

What makes it a secret? It certainly is not the number of people who know it. In fact, many would likely say they know the secret. Yet very few truly understand how to use it. Therein lies the secret.

What makes it powerful? If “power” is somewhat synonymous with “getting results,” then this secret is extremely powerful. The secret can increase your ability to achieve results, simply because the secret is linked to effectiveness and human motivation.

I began understanding the secret during my career with the management consulting division of what was then one of the Big-8 accounting and consulting firms. In the eight years I spent in that consulting practice, we had a standard way of addressing a client problem. We might be called in to review a particular department or activity. We would arrive with our army of bright people, interview those whom we believed were the key stakeholders, develop a set of recommendations based on our interviews and experience, and create what might be called the “100% Solution.” We would go away and come back a year later and perhaps, if we were lucky, 15% of the recommendations would be implemented.

In my final years with that organization, the practice in which I worked began taking a different approach. We would come in with a smaller group of consultants and work shoulder to shoulder with client personnel. Together we would convene group interviews (facilitated sessions) which typically included 8-20 people. In the facilitated sessions, the participants would create the recommendations, not us the consultants. In most cases, they would only come up with what we might consider the 60% or 70% solution. So we would float ideas based on our experience. Some they would accept, others they would reject as “not beneficial” or “not implementable” in their environment. When all was done, they might have created what we would call “the 85% solution.” Yet a year later, when we came back, amazingly 80-90% of the solution would be implemented!

Why wasn't more of the “100%” solution implemented? Why would the “85%” solution gained through facilitation fair far better? Therein lies the secret and the power behind it.

Prior to my grasping the secret, facilitating groups was about 10% of what I did on a day-to-day basis. Once I understood the power and effectiveness achieved through facilitation, I wanted to spend my time focused on this tool. In 1992, I left that consulting organization and founded *Leadership Strategies – The Facilitation Company*. An example from the work of *Leadership Strategies* may make the secret, and its power, even more apparent.

After reading the independent recommendations of an outside consulting firm (which didn't use facilitation!), the Mayor of a major metropolitan city issued a directive indicating that the Sanitation Bureau would move from three-person to two-person garbage pick-up crews. The director of the Sanitation Bureau believed strongly that the implementation of two-person crews would fail without the support and involvement of the workers. The director called us in to help the Bureau develop a plan for implementing the directive.

We recommended that the employees at each of the Bureau's three operating facilities elect four representatives to serve on the planning team. The head of the Bureau appointed several other team members, including one person each from the Finance Office, the Human Resources Office and the Union. In total, there were fifteen members of the team.

We facilitated the team through a series of eight half-day meetings using a project planning process to help focus on purpose, key outcome objectives, critical success factors, approach, scheduling, budgeting, etc. Though many team members had limited education, they understood sanitation issues and quickly were able to grasp the process as a vehicle for working through problems and alternatives.

As facilitators, we often used probing techniques to challenge what appeared to be recommendations that might undermine the goals of the team. Some challenges led to refinement of recommendations; other challenges proved irrelevant; and still others - though perhaps beneficial - the team consciously chose to ignore it. In the end, the team created a comprehensive plan with benefits clearly delineated. They were very proud of their work.

The team (not the facilitators) presented their plan to the Mayor and his cabinet. We coached the team members on presentation skills, group question & answer techniques, etc. One member of the team bought a suit specifically for this meeting with the Mayor. At the end of the presentation, the Chief Operating Officer for the city announced that it was the best presentation, recommendations and justification he had ever received from an employee work team. The recommendations, almost in their entirety, were implemented.

Consider the team of garbage workers and their state of mind after investing their hearts and souls in creating solution. They had two major concerns the night before the presentation. Of course there was the internal fear of presenting so poorly that you fall flat on your face - an emotion well-known to most of us. But outside of that fear, **their greatest concern was that the Mayor would not accept their recommendations!** Yet it was the mayor's idea in the first place to go to two-person crews. By putting the workers in charge of developing the plan for implementation, the Sanitation Director had made it their plan: they owned it and they were ready to sell it to the Mayor and to their co-workers.

Interested in learning more facilitation techniques? Check out our course, [The Effective Facilitator](#).

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He is a Certified Master Facilitator and a Certified Professional Facilitator. As a past president of the Southeast Association of Facilitators and a board member of the National Institute of Facilitation, Michael is a national leader in the facilitation industry. You can get more tips from either of Michael's books, [The Secrets of Facilitation](#) or [The Secrets to Masterful Meetings](#). You can receive a signed copy through our website.



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