

The Facilitative Manager

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The Contemporary Business Climate

In today's business environment there is an increasing demand for facilitation skills. The volatility and competitiveness of the market, shifting consumer allegiances, and the need to respond effectively to a range of new challenges such as new technology, has provoked a variety of responses from large companies. These have included massive downsizing, de-layering and restructuring to far reaching cultural and change management programmes.

In turn, this has resulted in a demand for a new style of management, one which is less embedded in command and control styles of leadership and dependent on hierarchical structures to one more suited to flatter structures and high performance teams. A new kind of leadership is being called for, one which is about creating a climate which is conducive to integrated team activities and with greater focus on the support and development of individual team members. One which can rise to new challenges with imagination and flexibility and which is characterised by an attitude of mind which is open rather than closed, tentative, curious and exploratory rather than definite and conclusive.

For many managers, these changes represent a loss of control and require new skills they either do not possess or have traditionally under developed. Often these are not the skills for which people have been hired in the first place. To develop these new skills requires time and practice, and a real understanding of the core value shift that underlies them.

The Value of Facilitation

One aspect of this core value shift is a movement from an expert/inexpert model of management interaction, to a model in which the manager is empowering subordinates to take responsibility for their own efforts and solutions. Here the manager resists the temptation to give advice and instead facilitates others in their own problem solving endeavours. Often this involves deceptively simple and apparently unglamorous skills such as really listening effectively, but the results can be impressive.

Research studies show that when a group is being facilitated by a manager and the manager talks less than 40% of the time a number of interesting and profound changes occur: Employees are more motivated to find their own solutions; there are less arguments in the team; constructive action is more likely; the capacity of individuals to accurately self diagnosis, increases markedly and the manager learns more about the situation and the employees involved, than they would do using a more traditional approach.

What is Facilitative Management?

The dictionary definition of facilitation is 'to make easy' or to remove obstacles'. Essentially what it is attempting to remove obstacles from is the process of completing a task. Too often in a work environment there is enormous attention paid to the task in hand and too little to the process of how people are going about things, and it is often the 'how' that undermines the task.

Petty rivalries or jealousies in the team undermine its competitive functioning, poor communication between different parts of the team or a failure to address the clear need for structural change can all make teams of people less effective than they desire to be. A facilitative management style is about paying attention to the process of getting things done so that employees can pay attention to the task and reach optimum performance.

Very broadly speaking a facilitative management style encompasses a range of interpersonal skills which are simple to describe but complex to practice and are often undervalued. This is because they are skills that people generally regard themselves as familiar with.

They include such competencies as active listening, being comfortable with silence, the use of open rather than closed questions, how to use clarifying questions, the use of appropriate body language and non verbal cues. But these are more than just skills or techniques which can often appear sterile and manipulative if practised in isolation without a proper understanding of the values they embody. A truly facilitative manager embodies this knowledge and makes it their own.

But facilitative management is about more than just listening. It is about regarding communication as a dynamic form of action. Traditionally, we have tended to regard effective management as about attaining pre-concieved objectives through unilateral manipulation. But any action can only be effective if it is based on valid assumptions. What if effective outcomes became more likely, if managers clarified their goals with subordinates beforehand and spent some time exploring where the gaps were in individual, group and corporate objectives and actions.

A facilitative manager needs both good intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. They need to be self aware as well as people aware. They need to be able to engage in self generated behaviour change as well as acting as change agents. They need to pay as much attention to how a team is going about the task as the task itself, recognising that it is often the how that undermines the what. Rather than manipulating people towards preconceived objectives they need to be able to conceive of management as a dynamic dialogue in which each is testing out the assumptions of the other in order to learn and to operate more effectively.

We have entered the information age and with it a primacy not only on information but a preoccupation with the manner in which information is conveyed or received. If organisations have had to become more flexible in order to cope with the demands of the market, then so have the individuals within them. To be effective, today's managers need to be able to engage simultaneously with the process of learning and doing.

If we are to have learning organisations then we have to have learning employees. If we are to establish cultures of continual quality improvement then the individuals concerned need to be able to simultaneously work and to interrogate what they are doing at the same time. To embrace a process whereby they are continually testing their own assumptions and stretching their awareness resulting in self-initiated changes in behaviour.

Elements is a Management Development Consultancy which specialises in developing people's facilitation skills and facilitative management styles through a process known as action inquiry.

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