

# Facilitated Negotiation as a Change Agent in Work Teams

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the idea that facilitated negotiation has a transforming effect on team dynamics. It establishes an active association between the intervention and resolution of difficulties. It considers the topic in the context of organizational work teams. The paper explores a specific problem: How is facilitated negotiation a useful intervention technique to change the way individuals in a work-team deal with one another and sort through conflicts. It studies the various dynamics that lead to a team's inability to work through issues and challenges. The article touches upon the viability of different intervention types. Most specifically, it showcases how negotiated facilitation is a helpful aid that leads a team to make mutually acceptable and satisfying decisions to all team members. It also considers the necessity of an educational component to help move a team to self-sufficiency in conflict resolution. A major premise of the essay is that sustained and protracted conflict within a group can render it helpless to work cohesively and collaboratively on the organizational tasks. While the investigation has wide-spread relevance, the deliberation is primarily from a North American frame, most notably a Canadian perspective. The findings are proposed for human resource management practitioners and workplace team leaders and facilitators.

## **Key Words**

Change agent, challenges, communication, conflict, dispute, dynamics, education, facilitated negotiation, interpersonal, problem, relationship, resolution, team, transform.

## **Introduction**

A work-team can most often sort through challenges and difficulties on their own accord. However, there are times when teams are either unable to successfully handle a problem, or is riddled with protracted conflict. If the conflict spirals to prolonged levels, team practice is that of disrespectful interpersonal exchanges whereby team members fail to see the other person's humanity. If sets of conflict become entrenched and the group fails to find a proper avenue to reverse the established paradigm, group members begin to see unresolved conflict as a normal part of the team's existence. Subsequently, a decrease in trust, power imbalances, and poor communication patterns emerge as a mainstay of the team's life. Within this fabric of the team's experience, individual team members treat one another disrespectfully, where they fail to see the other person's humanity. This paper examines how a facilitated negotiation is a useful tool for a team to utilize to help them work through issues that they cannot handle. The objective of the paper is three-fold. First, it provides the reader with an overview of various intervention techniques and a basic understanding of facilitated negotiation. Second, it examines the assortment of team dynamics that renders a team helpless in handling specific problems. Third, it explores how facilitated negotiation is a viable team intervention technique that allows its members to transform how they work. Within this framework of objectives, the paper examines how facilitated negotiation can restore the synergetic qualities in a team when it does not exist. It considers how an education component must be part of a facilitated negotiation to teach the group self-sufficiency in handling future challenges and conflicts. The argument the paper presents is that facilitated negotiation is a viable option that serves as an agent to re-build and re-configure relationships that enable the team to work in the best interest of its members and the organization.

## **Team Conflict**

### *Teams and Conflict -*

A team is a group of individuals working together toward a common purpose. Members have complementary skills, members' work is mutually dependent, and the group has discretion over tasks performed (Belcourt, Singh, Snell, Morris and

Bohlander, 2017, p 147). Conflict in a team is inevitable. Author Williams Hall (2018) breaks team conflict into two areas:

Cognitive Conflict and Affective Conflict (p 187). The cognitive conflict focuses on problem-related differences of opinion, and affective conflict refers to the emotional reactions that can arise when disagreements become personal rather than professional (Parayitam and Dooley, 2009). Common causes of team conflict include disagreements over task-related issues, interpersonal incompatibilities, and simple fatigue (Hall, 2018, p 187).

#### *Team Synergy -*

Teamwork embraces synergy, which means the interaction and outcome of team members are higher than the sum of their efforts (Belcourt et al., 2017, p 148). But, synergy is not automatic; instead, teams must nurture it within the team environment. To nurture effectively, team members must support one another by exhibiting an atmosphere of inclusion and engage in active listening. Additionally, they should see disagreement as a natural part of the team experience, reach an agreement through consensus, value all team member's contributions, and a commitment by each team member to excellent performance (p 148). While these nurturing characteristics generally evolve on their own through various team-building activities, teams can run into difficulties working through problems, even when synergetic qualities in a group do not exist. When these qualities do not exist, a team intervention is needed.

#### **Team Intervention Methods**

When a team disrupts its synergy, it is sometimes difficult for the team to restore a level of cooperative energy without intervention. There are a variety of team intervention techniques designed to build a strong team and address team problems. Team-building is one technique that is used extensively as an intervention technique to deal with team challenges (McShane, Tasa, and Steen, 2018). Team-building refers to “the activity of attempting to improve a work group’s effectiveness of doing its work, maintaining the relationships of its members and the team’s contributions to the wider organizational system” (Anderson, 2017, p 259). It can take on many forms, including fun and relaxing activities such as a team having fun and learning about one another

outside the work environment, dinner outside of office hours, or a relaxed event built into a meeting agenda (p 259). Other activities include confrontation meetings, which are diagnostic meetings to address areas of ineffectiveness and dissatisfaction (p 265). Team-building as an intervention can fail if "team leaders do not listen to or accept input from team members, if they do not follow up on the team's priorities, or if they set overly aggressive goals that do not get met" (Anderson, 2017, p 266). Further, such interventions may not alter the performance desired. For instance, organizational development expert A. Anderson explains that after team-building interventions, a pattern of regression occurred when team cohesion and unity, and energy for collaboration and trusting relationships, reverted to old traditions (p 260). From Anderson's research, it is apparent that team-building is not a significant change agent.

Some organizations turn to other avenues of intervention to deal with team difficulties and persistent problems. Various methods range from informal to formal. A popular way is a negotiation role play (Anderson, 2017, pp 266-268). This informal method puts team members in a position to negotiate responsibilities without needing a leader to decide for them. It is highly participative and can build team consensus and responsibilities. (p 267). However, because role negotiation requires the team members to have a significant level of trust and comfort in expressing disagreement, it is not an active change agent if parties are unwilling or incapable of displaying these qualities.

Other third-party interventions include mediation and arbitration, which the leader generally manages, formally. Mediation is typically a formal process in which disputants attempt to resolve their differences with the help of a third party they find acceptable (Hocker and Wilmot, 2018, p 299). The goal is to help the team reach a voluntary agreement fair to the parties (Belourt et al., 2017, p 476). Moore Arbitration refers to a process where a third party is in charge of both the process and the outcome. Arbitration focuses mostly on content issues (Hocker and Wilmot, 2018, p 312). In contrast, mediation helps the parties sort through content issues, but also aides in other problems such as communication and relationship (Rioux and Redekop, 2013, p 264).

A third method is facilitation, where a leader guides the team in facilitated negotiation. A facilitator is sometimes the team leader that makes a final decision when

the team cannot agree. On the spectrum of third-party intervention processes, the mode of intervention in facilitation is slightly less than mediation (Hocker and Wilmot, 2018, p 294). However, as a process, some texts label facilitated negotiation as a type of mediation.

### **Facilitated Negotiation as an Intervention Technique**

#### *What is Facilitated Negotiation? - (The basic Process)*

Facilitated negotiation is an intervention technique used when bargaining breaks down, and the disputing parties are unable to reach an agreement on their own (Thompson, 2012, p 361). Disputing parties engage in facilitated negotiation when they believe in the legitimacy of negotiation as a process to resolve problems, but the parties need help managing the process. Facilitation is one of the three styles of mediation. Thus, it is a form of mediation (Folger, Poole, and Stutman, 2001, p 283). The other two methods of mediation are formulation and manipulation. Respectively, these refer to a facilitator (or mediator) proposing new solutions to the parties and using his or her positive leverage to influence the bargaining process, such as offering incentives (Thompson, 2012, p 365). In a study by Folger et al., out of the three mediation methods, facilitation negotiation had the most significant influence on increasing the prospect of reducing tension and redirecting the team (p 62). Folger et al. findings give credence to the notion that facilitated negotiation serves as a change agent.

In a facilitated negotiation, the facilitator is in charge of the process. The degree of control is moderate compared to other third-party intervention types, such as a formulation type of mediation and arbitration. Overall, the amount of control depends on the level that the team wants (Folger et al., 2001, p 287). Regardless of the level in direction, the facilitator has power over the process by controlling the communication between the parties. The facilitator will determine the agenda, who speaks, and when, whether or not to separate parties into separate rooms and how much information is shared (Lewicki, Barry, Saunders, and Tasa, 2011, p 201).

While the facilitator controls the process, he or she does not govern the outcome. Instead, the agreement is arrived at by the parties themselves with the facilitator's assistance (Moore, 2003). However, the facilitator has a certain degree of motivation

control over both the process and outcome to encourage parties to move forward (Folger et al., 2001, pp 288-289). The mediator's approach in a facilitated negotiation is contingent on how much value the third-party attaches to the achievement of the disputant's goals or on his or her perception of whether there is sufficient common ground for the parties to reach an agreement (p 294).

#### *Role of the Facilitator -*

A facilitator is typically an in-house person or a consultant outside of work (Hall, pp 188-189). Ideally, a third-party intervenor, including the facilitator, should be impartial and not have an assigned interest in the outcome (Moore, 2003). However, there are times when a team manager assumes the role of the facilitator. While one can postulate that a manager in a facilitator role might neutrally direct the process, it seems plausible that this might not always be correct. For example, if the performance of the manager's unit is influenced by the conflict, the manager – in the facilitator role – may not direct the process objectively. Authors, Folger et al. (2001) explain that if the facilitator has a vested interest in the outcome, he or she will direct a result that fits his or her aim for the team's performance (pp 293). If the manager's directive stems from a genuine desire for the team's best interest, his or her partiality is not necessarily problematic. However, if the directive stems from self-interest or personal gain, it is debatable whether the manager should be in charge of the facilitated negotiation (p 294).

A facilitator orchestrates how the negotiation will unfold by directing the through a variety of steps. Steps can take on many forms, but generally, the process itself includes stages of “orientation, background information, issue process, proposal development and resolution” (Folger et al., 2001, pp 300-302). The steps are not linear, and the facilitator encourages parties to move back to earlier stages to clarify items or garner additional information. In essence, the facilitator serves as a channel of communication among disputing parties (Thompson, 2012, p 364). He or she assists people with clashing perspectives to achieve common goals or understanding, usually by encouraging creativity (Rioux 2013, p 296). Creativity takes on many forms; one common practice by the facilitator is to get parties to bring forth a variety of options to resolve the problem. After, they brainstorm to determine which option or combination of

options is best (Lewicki et al., 2001). Indeed, the facilitator is instrumental in enacting change in how team members think about resolving a conflict or sorting through a problem.

*Facilitated negotiation to transform team dynamics into a healthy form -*

A team can experience challenges and problems due to the assortment of team dynamics that are naturally part of a team's existence, including emotion, interpersonal exchanges, role configuring, communication interplays, and power quests. When a team uses destructive tactics in their interactions within these and other areas, and they have trouble reverting to effective tactics, issues can quickly move from the problem-solving stage to issue proliferation. Issue proliferation refers to parties walking away from the problem at hand. When this occurs, the disputants lose sight of the original issue and focus on the other person as the problem (Lederach, 1995, 2003). If the parties are unable to revert to the problem-solving stage, the conflict can escalate to "triangularization," which means the disputants bring a third-party in, not to facilitate resolution; but, instead to agree with their agenda or position. There is always hope that the parties on their own accord can move away from this stage and steer back to problem-solving; however, if they are unable, the conflict can escalate to more advanced stages of destructive tactics and even to polarization (Hocker and Wilmot, 2018). Polarization refers to the parties being on extreme opposite ends of the spectrum in the resolution of the conflict; they may draw others in, forming two polarized sides. At this stage, and even before, it is highly problematic for the team to move back to the problem-solving phase. Facilitated negotiation is a viable method to counteract the escalation. The technique helps the unit revert to uncovering the initial problem and deal with various people's issues that are restricting it from working collaboratively and congenially.

With a goal of negotiation to move parties to an agreement (Lewicki, 2011), a facilitated form is well-suited to helping the parties attain this goal. The technique can modify the way members of a team interact with the various dynamic forces that occur. As an agent of change, a worthy facilitator can move the parties through two broad phases that enable the parties to appropriately work on the problems and find a



mutually satisfying resolution; the stages include 1) Differentiation and 2) Integration (Folger et al., 2001, pp 302-304). Differentiation consists of a period where the team overlooks everyday needs, compound the issues, and use a variety of destructive tactics; issues complicate and proliferate. On the surface, this set of circumstances seems counter-productive to a team being able to deal with various dynamics and resolve the problem effectively. However, according to research by business professor, Richard Walton (1987), it is a needed and valuable phase of the negotiation because low conflict intensity leads to inactivity and avoidance, neglect of information, and low joint-performance. As authors McShane et al. (2018) explain, successful conflict resolution occurs when teams experience some degree of conflict; however, they emphasize that there is a point in which the team must engage collaboratively under challenging circumstances rather than ignore it (p 309).

In keeping with what McShane et al. idea, a differentiation stage is valuable, but a team must move out of this stage to the integration phase. When a team is not able to move to this stage, a facilitator is necessary. The facilitator can help the unit enter an integration phase. Walton (1987) suggests that the integration phase is vital in work transformation because it is where problems and emotions become focused. Further, Walter expounds that it is the area where the parties can decipher what is worth fighting. The facilitator can help the team to keep conflict at moderate intensity. This intervention is relevant because, at reasonable levels, parties can seek and integrate information, consider more alternatives, and experience a strong impulse to improve the situation (De Dreu, 2006, p 86). Indeed, in the role of an intervenor to move the parties to a phase of integration, a facilitator is a catalyst for change in team dynamics.

#### *The Role of Negotiated Facilitation in Guiding a Team through Challenges and Problems -*

Anderson (2017) explains that teams experience many challenging and pervasive problems (pp 259-260). Facilitated negotiation is a viable intervention technique to help the unit work through an assortment of strenuous happenings. By analyzing and assessing the group's dynamics, individual and group interests, and the personal behavior patterns of individual members and interaction with other team members, a facilitator is a significant change agent. Specifically, the facilitator can be a

valuable resource by helping the team to sort through interpersonal and role conflicts, improve communication patterns, enhance decision-making ability, correct process and task confusion, guide power misuse and imbalance, and aide conflict resolution:

### *1. Interpersonal and Role Conflicts –*

Teams experience various interpersonal and role conflicts. Conflict resolution experts Hocker and Wilmot (2018) explain interpersonal conflict as an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals (p 3). The point of contention between the parties can stem from many things. Authors Littlejohn and Domenici (2007) categorize disputes into five forms that include: 1) data conflict, such as a lack of information; 2) interest conflict, such as perceived or actual competition over substantive interests; 3) relationship conflict, such as strong emotions; 4) value conflict, such as different ideology; and 5) structural conflicts, such as time constraints (pp 11-12).

Facilitated negotiation is a valuable process for reaching a consensus on the difficulties within the categories noted above. To agree, the individual team members must trust one another (Thompson, 2012). Hence, the facilitator must find ways to increase the level of trust between the parties. A facilitator can provide a suitable environment and develop activities that help build the relationship between parties. Through such intervention, facilitated negotiation changes the dynamics of the interaction between the parties by altering some aspects of the on-going relationship between them. Third-party intervention expert Christopher Moore (2003) suggests that facilitators change the parties' relationships, not their values. Moore suggests that the facilitator accomplishes this feat by assisting the parties to change behaviors, attitudes, and the structural relationship within which parties interact (pp 411-412). Some specific strategies that the facilitator might employ to guide the parties through interpersonal conflict are arranging activities for the parties to "like" one another. In doing so, while opposing values will not change, when people like one another, they are more willing to tolerate others' behavior (Moore, 2003, p 412). Thus, facilitated negotiation is

instrumental in transforming the relationship dynamics to foster a cordial work relationship between the parties.

When there is role conflict, facilitated negotiation helps guide the parties to understand their own and others' roles and coach them to do a better job in their roles. For example, for team members in spokesperson roles who are ill-equipped in speaking and negotiation skills, the facilitator can affirm and support them in activities about their responsibility. Further, the facilitator can coach them on how to carry out their functions. This guidance may include process suggestions, education about specific tactics, and help clarify interests and goals (Moore, 2007, p 433).

## *2. Improving Communication Patterns –*

Many factors can hinder effective communication. For instance, high emotion in negotiating can stop the flow of the process. A third-party intervenor, such as a facilitator, can alter the communication pattern by restarting the process flow. Rioux and Redekop (2013) suggest an effective strategy is to introduce a sub-process to address the role that emotion plays in the conflict (p 250). Once the parties gain a better understanding of their own and others' feelings, they are in a position to move back to problem-solving the issues at hand. Work-conflict authors Cloke and Goldsmith (2011) suggest that reframing emotions are an effective strategy that helps the parties channel destructive emotions into constructive forms of owning and acknowledging feelings, discovering their more profound meaning, and encouraging empathy in others (p 111).

Another way that facilitated negotiation transform a team's communication patterns is by changing the story-telling parameters. For instance, the facilitator can guide the parties to achieve a level of communication that allows for an even exchange of story-telling by each team member. Each person can explain the situation from his or her point of view, unencumbered. Littlejohn and Domenici (2007) suggest that communication patterns evolve to acknowledge difference, but it also acknowledges what is shared (p 110). Thus, the facilitated negotiation helps the team draw out and support the commonalities and recognize and respect the differences. This aspect creates an association of respect amongst the parties.

Another strategy to enhance communication forms is to set an appropriate stage for the team to dialogue. For example, to help team members be more active, empathetic, and a committed listener, an effective strategy is to configure the room setting appropriately. A productive meeting arrangement is to position the facilitator's chair, so it does not display partiality by being nearer to one person than another (Moore, 2003). While arranging desks and chairs is not the end-all answer for improved communication patterns, "Consciously setting the stage for communication can dramatically improve the mood of a conversation" (Cloke and Goldsmith, 2011, p 39).

### *3. Enhancing Problem-solving Decision-making Ability –*

Facilitated negotiation is an active process to help coordinate problem-solving and decision-making within the team. The facilitator's level of control in the decision-making area depends on the degree of intervention he or she assumes in the negotiation. The facilitator can be a person who informs the parties about appropriate decision-making procedures to a process observer who makes an occasion procedural suggest to assist parts in negotiating the issues. If the team members have sound problem-solving and decision-making skills, the facilitator may assume a less controlling role in this area. However, as Moore (2003) explains, if the team is not sophisticated in this area, the facilitator will play a more directive role (p 431). A facilitator can spur on more exceptional problem-solving and decision-making ability by encouraging lateral thinking, which means using the creative side of the brain to make associations between indirectly related concepts (Rioux and Redekopp, 2013, p 249). The facilitator will also work to adjust communication patterns to promote creative problem-solving (Folger et al., 2001, p 290). Lastly, the facilitator can guide the team by helping them decide what the rules for decision-making are – is it through a majority rule or consensus, for example (Rioux and Redekop, 2013, p 250).

### *4. Correcting Process and Task Confusion*

A team can experience difficulties surrounding process and tasks. Regarding process, if a team finds it difficult to construct the outline of the negotiation process and channel the interaction as a whole, third-party intervention is needed. The facilitator can

help the parties organize and structure the methods they follow during the interaction and “well-grooved patterns and cycles of interaction” (Folger et al., 2001, p 297).

Regarding task confusion, team members may disagree about who is doing what task(s) to reach their organizational objective. To bring clarity and to draw out a shared responsibility - mainly if there is considerable misunderstanding present among members of the group - facilitated negotiation is a process that can steer the parties to brainstorm around ideas about what the tasks are, who is to accomplish what and when. Authors Rioux and Redekop (2013) suggest that one tactic to get parties to brainstorm effectively is for the facilitator to begin a session with a word association process unrelated to the presenting issue. This tactic gets the group to work together, establishing a positive mood, and stimulating the creative side of the brain (p 249).

#### *5. Overturning Power Imbalance*

Power, in itself, is not a terrible thing. As authors, Littlejohn and Dominici (2007) expound, "Power gets things done" (p 92). However, power drives can create conflict and gets in the way of the team achieving its organizational goal. If the team is unable to negotiate on their own because some team members dominate the conversations, facilitated negotiation can be an avid process to alleviate the problem. One way is to realign power. Rioux and Redekop (2013) suggest that an effective strategy in this regard is to "stipulate that no one speaks longer than a certain amount of time and that, whenever two people wish to speak at once, the facilitator gives preference to the person who has not yet spoken" (p 249). If the power imbalance is due to a competition for power, the facilitator can change the movement from competition for control to a state that attains ongoing shared power (Littlejohn and Dominici, 2007, p 93). Irrespective of which category of power imbalance is at stake, facilitated negotiation is a competent driver of change for a team.

#### *6. Conflict Resolution: Reaching Agreement –*

“Conflict resolution is apparent when members have fewer objections and indicate more agreement with each other . . . it indicates a solution that is acceptable to the entire group” (O’neill and Allen, 2014, p 160). But, not all teams can reach an agreement. Further, while the team might reach an agreement, if it is not mutually

arrived at and satisfying to all, it will not be a sustainable and effective agreement. If this is the case, entering a facilitated negotiation can be a relevant avenue for change in the team's ability to arrive at a mutually appropriate resolution.

There are various ways that a facilitator can enact change. One way is to help the unit define to whom they are responsible and who should ultimately be involved in final agreement (Moore, 2003, p 439). A second way is to steer the team to resolve more straightforward issues first to help the group gain confidence in their ability to agree (Lewicki, 2011). A third way is to guide the team to decide on priorities. Rioux and Redekop (2013) explain one effective way is for the facilitator to have each team member list various options on separate sheets of paper attached to the wall. The facilitator gives each team member several coloured adhesive dots, which they stick on the possibilities that they value; at the end of the exercise, it is clear which option is the most favoured (p 250).

### **The Educational Component of Facilitated Negotiation**

While facilitated negotiation is not primarily an educational exercise (Moore, 2003, p 95), it must include an educational component. An education component opens the door for the team to move to self-sufficiency in conflict resolution. Being self-sufficient means that the group requires little or no help from a third-party. Some degree of independence is essential because it is not practical to entirely rely on an intervenor to help the team address challenges and resolve conflict. Additionally, when a team becomes reliant on a third-party, they can become complacent about their current conflict resolution status. If a team is satisfied that the only avenue to resolve disputes is to wait for the facilitator, it may become inundated with unresolved conflict. This outcome is problematic because a team with unresolved conflicts may experience impasses, deadlocks, and barriers to moving forward. In contrast, a team with resolved conflicts likely integrates, combines, and synthesizes divergent views and achieves consensus on how best to proceed (O'neill and Allen, 2014, p 159).

Everything about a facilitated negotiation should consistently lead toward its outcomes (Anderson, 2017, p 217). In the context of a workplace, the result centers on organizational tasks. A facilitated negotiation must provide training to equip the team

with the appropriate skills for conflict prevention and resolution so the team can achieve their jobs. Education should take the form of teaching team members how the problem-solving process occurs (Anderson, 2017, p 216), conflict resolution and dispute management skills, and peer mediation (instructing team members how to act in a role of a facilitator when disputes arise (Moore, 2003, p 26). When appropriate, facilitators can hold meetings with individual team members - often referred to as a caucus meeting – to teach disputants about conflict resolution skills (p 372).

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored the useful role of facilitated negotiation. It showcased that facilitated negotiation is a valuable third-party intervention technique. It displayed the basics of how facilitated negotiation works and suggested that facilitated negotiation is one mediation style. As a form of mediation, the facilitator is in charge of the process but not the outcome. The paper pointed out that a facilitator may exude different levels of control but did not delve extensively into differences in authority between task and process issues. As more or less power might be better one of these areas over the other, a more in-depth study is required. The paper explained that while a team strives for synergy, co-operation may not automatically happen; hence, it is sometimes necessary for a group to engage in a third-party intervention. However, it also explained that a team must learn to become self-sufficient in conflict resolution into the future. Thus, the article stressed that education is a necessary component of facilitated negotiation to improve a team's ability to resolve problems in the future. The many ways that a facilitated negotiation directs the team through difficulties and challenges towards agreement exemplifies the value and competence of facilitated negotiation as a change agent in a team. Yes, facilitated negotiation can be transformative. It enables team members to redefine their encounter from a conflict to be resolved competitively to a problem to be solved mutually.

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