

Developing a Framework of Facilitator Competencies: Lessons from the Field

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People in organizations are increasingly called upon to serve as small group facilitators or to assist in this role. This article uses data collected from practicing facilitators at three points of time and a building block process of collection, analysis, further collection, and consolidation to develop and refine a list of competencies. A framework of facilitator competencies is then proposed. Suggestions for research and practice are offered.

Keywords: Small Group Facilitation, Teams, Competencies

Teamwork and specifically team-based effectiveness has emerged as a dominant theme in both practical and theoretical research (Baker & Gerlowski, 2007). Theorists have proposed that effective teamwork delivers significant benefits to organizations in terms of time and cost savings and increased quality of work (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Sundstrom & Associates, 1999; Vaill, 1978). A central issue in team-based performance is the role of facilitators in improving group dynamics and effectiveness (McLagan & Bedrick, 1983).

The terms facilitator and facilitation, however, have been used to denote a variety of roles and activities. As Kolb (2004) states, "People called in to facilitate groups may be expected to lead, mediate, train, present new information, make process suggestions, serve as peacemakers, take notes, or simply be there in case their expertise is needed" (p. 207). According to Schwarz (2002), the term "facilitator" is used to refer to people who fulfill a variety of roles in groups, including those of leader, mediator, content matter expert, and instructor. This lack of consistency in definitions can create confusion for both practitioners and researchers. In discussing facilitation, then, clarity in how the term is used is critical. The process function of facilitation is the focus of this paper. This process role includes the following functions: (a) managing group discussions and processes in a way that allows group members to have a positive experience; (b) delivering service that promotes valuable results in group dialogue, analysis, and planning; and (c) providing techniques or practice that make it easier for groups to interact and/or accomplish goals (Frey, 1994; McLagan & Bedrick, 1983; Pierce, Cheesebrow, & Braun, 2000).

Given the prevalence of the facilitator role and the number of people who are called upon to serve or assist in this function, research on the competencies needed and the challenges faced by people who serve as small group or team facilitators provides useful information. This information should allow Human Resource Development (HRD) and Organization Development (OD) professionals to better prepare people to facilitate groups and thus help groups and teams to function more effectively.

Problem Statement and Questions

The primary purpose of this research is to propose a framework of the facilitation role that can be useful for training and development and organization development purposes. The starting point for this research, the initial list of competencies used, is from the quantitative and qualitative data reported by Kolb and Rothwell (2002). Further collection and analysis allowed us to expand and refine this list and ultimately to propose a framework of core competencies that is grounded in small group research literature and supported with data from three samples of facilitators. The data reported in this paper are a subset of a larger study.

- RQ1: What rankings do a sample of small group facilitators give to items included in a list of facilitator competencies provided to them?
- RQ2: What additional facilitator competencies do practitioners mention when given an opportunity to add to the list?
- RQ3: What rankings do a second sample of small group facilitators give to items included in a revised list of facilitator competencies provided to them?
- RQ4: What framework of core competencies emerges from this data?

Theoretical Framework

In spite of differences in the use of the term “facilitator,” there is agreement among scholars and practitioners that the primary task of the person(s) in this role is to help groups accomplish both task and relationship functions. This dual framework for studying group process began with Benne and Sheats (1948) and Bales (1950); behaviors observed in groups were classified as fulfilling either task or maintenance (also called relationship or social-emotional) purposes. Kelly and Thibaut (1954) and later Bales (1970), in a revision of his earlier work, argued that task and social dimensions of group process are highly interdependent and in Kelly and Thibaut’s words “virtually indistinguishable” (p. 736) from each other. Kelly and Thibaut (1954) and then Fisher (1980) used the term “dimensions” to indicate that the two functions are inseparable and that without either dimension, the group process does not exist. There also is a reciprocal relationship between the two in that an increase in productivity tends to increase the cohesiveness of a group (Engleberg & Wynn, 1997). Self-centered roles that get in the way of group process also have been identified (Engleberg & Wynn, 1997), as have activities that reflect a topical focus track that is separate from the task dimension (Poole, 2003). Given the vast amount of research that has accumulated on group communication and group decision making, the fact that these two dimensions still are used as the primary language in discussing group process are an indication of the elegance of the framework.

These dual dimensions, essential to group process, also serve as a useful reference point for a framework for classifying small group facilitator competencies. We do not claim that all competencies fall under this umbrella, but rather that much of the role of the facilitator has to do with helping groups accomplish their tasks and get along with each other while doing so.

Related Literature Review

Team Effectiveness

To date, numerous scholars have studied the value and properties of collaborative groups and team effectiveness (Baker & Gerlowski, 2007; Bushe & Coetzer, 2007; Gil, Alcover, & Peiró, 2005; Gladstein, 1987; Hackman, 1990; Hirokawa & Keyton, 1995; Kolb & Sandmeyer, 2007; Kolb & Gray, 2007; LaFasto & Larson, 2001). Gladstein (1987) presented what he called a comprehensive model of work group effectiveness, implying that “difference in group effectiveness cannot be attributed solely to the behaviors used to accomplish the group’s task” (p. 499). In 1988, Hersey and Blanchard proposed a model of group effectiveness that focused on leadership needs. According to Hersey and Blanchard, group progress and effectiveness are affected by group maturity. They posited that group maturity is a continuous variable that is influenced by the two factors of group ability and group willingness. Members of the mature group, for example, require less extensive encouragement or prodding to work on tasks than do members of the immature group. In short, the authors maintain that for the effectiveness of task performance, the ability and motivational levels of group members are the most valuable determinant factors. This research points out the diversity of groups and the need for facilitators to be flexible in determining how they can best serve the needs of each group.

Group effectiveness also has been related to group performance and the ability of the group to exist over time, and to individual members’ satisfaction with group processes (Hirokawa & Keyton, 1995). Kolb (1996) identified appropriate communication systems as well as clear project goals and defined member roles, responsibilities, and accountability as team characteristics necessary for effective team functioning. Gladstein (1987) found, furthermore, that dynamic communication, active leadership, and supportive organizational context all were positively related to group performance and effectiveness.

Hackman (1990) discussed the role and influence of organizational context positively associated with effective performance of group or team tasks. He identified three primary key strategies of work team effectiveness: (a) a group structure that promotes competent work on the task; (b) supportive organizational circumstance; and (c) available expert coaching, facilitating, and process assistance. The first strategy points out the importance of the level of task clarity and core norms. The second includes various instructional and information systems, whereas the third emphasizes that an organization should provide adequate resources and assistance in a timely manner. In a later study, LaFasto and Larson (2001) found that teams that were able to solve problems in creative and effective ways were those in which group members were focused in their efforts, operated within a positive climate, and practiced open communication. They also proposed the essential characteristics of effective teams as: (a) collaborative and positive team relations, (b) productive problem-solving process, (c) leadership that fosters collective achievement, and (d) supportive environment that encourages collaboration and teamwork. Thus, however talented the facilitator, s/he is only one factor that influences the effectiveness of teams.

Role of Group Facilitator

As mentioned, there is no single definition or use of the term “facilitator” (Kolb & Rothwell, 2002; Pierce, Cheesebrow, & Braun, 2000). Although the term may be used differently in various contexts, it is, according to most commonly cited references, a person whose primary concern is related to group process and problem solving (Frey, 1994; Kolb & Rothwell, 2002; McLagan & Bedrick, 1983; Schwarz, 1994, 2002). The primary role of the facilitator can be described as managing group discussion and group dynamics so as to encourage group members to achieve planned goals based on positive and collaborative interactions.

Usually, the facilitator is the person who makes the group’s task easier and helps a group improve its internal functions (Kolb, 2004). McLagan and Bedrick (1983) described in their competency research the outputs of the facilitators as 1) group discussions in which issues and needs are profitably assessed, 2) cohesive teams, and 3) enhanced understanding of group process for all members. McLagan (1989), in a later competency study, mentioned the roles of the facilitator as presenting information, directing structured learning experiences, and managing group discussion and process. Furthermore, according to Spencer (1989), the role of facilitator is to lead the group in eliciting answers, building a vision, and developing management plans that motivate all group members to achieve agreed-upon goals. Tahar (2000) addressed one of the core competencies of the facilitator as an ability to build understanding and agreement with groups by helping members identify underlying assumptions and build an atmosphere of openness and collaboration. Finally, McFadzean (2002) suggests that facilitator should keep the group on track and make sure that they do not deviate from their assigned goals. Also, facilitators should be able to use their human relations skills, self-knowledge, awareness of non-verbal communication, and high-level communication skills to coordinate the group and manage the participants’ diverse thinking (VanGundy, 1992).

The following definition of facilitator was used in this study and included in materials distributed to participants: a person who remains neutral in the actual decision(s) of the group but who assumes the responsibility for managing the group’s process while it is attempting to solve a problem or reach a decision. Participants, by returning their questionnaires, affirmed that they had experience in this type of facilitation and, further, would keep this context in mind when responding to questions. The clarity in role definition provided in this study is important given the multitude of expectations for people in this role.

Method

Sample

The first group of participants included 20 practitioners who serve in the role of facilitating decision making through managing group process. Their average work experience is 6.9 years: 85% of participants work internally in one organization and the remaining 15% work for more than one organization. A separate group of 20 practitioners participated in the second round of data collection. Their average work experience is 5.4 years: 75% of participants work internally and 25% work for more than one organization. Participants’ preparation for the facilitation role, in addition to on-the-job training, was a combination of informal and formal learning—participating in and/or observing facilitation (83%), self-directed learning/readings (43%), college coursework and formal training (each 33%), and coaching by experienced facilitator (28%).

Procedure

This study involved eight phases of data collection and analysis beginning with an analysis of the data previously reported by Kolb and Rothwell (2002). The participants in the Kolb and Rothwell study were 63 members of the International Society of Performance Improvement who had experience as facilitators.

Phase 1: Initial analysis. The authors met to refine the initial list of 11 competencies and 10 themes from the Kolb and Rothwell study (2002) into a revised list of competencies that would be used in Phase 2. We kept the original phrasing as much as possible but combined items as necessary to reduce redundancy. The revised list for this study included 21 statements of facilitator competencies. Six statements from the original list remained with their exact wording, two others were combined into one statement, and the essence of two others remained in competencies that were derived from the thematic analysis. One item that was ranked considerably below the others was omitted from the list that would go forward to Phase 2. This decision was based not only on the ranking of the item, but also the content of the statement, which was not consistent with the neutrality of the facilitator role as defined in this study.

Phase 2: Development of questionnaire to be used in Phase 3. Final wording was determined and short-answer questions added. Due to space constraints, only the short-answer question related to additions to the list of competencies is included in this paper.

Phase 3: Pilot study - four experienced facilitators reviewed the questionnaire for content and clarity. Minor changes to wording were made.

Phase 4: Round 1 of data collection. The questionnaire was sent to facilitators who were identified using a qualified snowball sampling process. We started by asking people on an eastern university campus who were known for using facilitators in their work groups to provide names of facilitators. The people named were contacted and asked to participate in the study and also to provide names of other facilitators. Participants were given the choice of having the questionnaire mailed, faxed, or sent electronically. Options for return of the questionnaire were the same. In two cases, we sent the questionnaire to one individual who then distributed it to others who were known to facilitate groups. Care was taken to remove all identifying information from surveys returned electronically in accordance with University policies regarding use of electronic data. Twenty completed questionnaires were used for the analysis in Phase 3.

Phase 5: Analysis of data from Phase 4 and modifications to questionnaire. From the analysis of first round responses, two items were added to the list of competencies: 1) Creates a climate that supports interaction and discussion, and 2) Encourages group involvement in, and ownership of, issues and tasks. Thus, a total 23 competencies were presented to respondents in Round 2.

Phase 6: Round 2 of data collection. The questionnaire containing the revised list of 23 competencies was distributed to an additional 20 facilitators. Instead of by mail as in Phase 4, distribution in this phase was face-to-face prior to a training session delivered by one of the authors. All the people in the session worked as facilitators.

Phase 7: Analysis of data from Phase 6.

Phase 8: Development of Facilitator Framework. Analysis of all data to develop a framework of facilitator competencies to be used for training and development purposes.

Data Analysis

The participants were asked to rate each item on a list of competencies by using a Likert-type scale with points ranging from a low of 1 to a high of 5. For RQ1 and RQ5, the participants' ratings of competencies were calculated using descriptive statistics; items were ranked using average scores. The short-answer responses were all transcribed verbatim. Data coding involved two steps: 1) line-by-line analysis of open-coding method, and 2) axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first step of line-by-line analysis was conducted by close examination of data and labeling each meaningful unit. Then, the second step of axial coding, in which categories emerged from a process of comparing codes generated by the previous step, allowed the authors to produce data clusters for each research question.

Results

RQ1: What rankings do a sample of small group facilitators give to items included in a list of facilitator competencies provided to them? Ratings are presented in Table 1 in descending order of frequency.

Table 1. *Descriptive Results for Each Facilitator Competency (First group, n =20)*

Rank	Competency	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	Listens actively	4.75	0.55
2	Keeps group focused on issues	4.65	0.49
3	Completes follow-up activities	4.50	0.61
4	Helps group clarify purpose and establish ground rules	4.45	0.51
5	Uses questions skillfully	4.30	0.66
6	Paraphrases and summarizes segments of content	4.30	0.66
7	Handles disruptive individual whose behavior is detrimental	4.15	0.88
8	Uses techniques appropriate for task and group	4.10	0.72
9	Observes and attends to non-verbals in group members	4.05	1.00
10	Maintains adherence to ground rules	4.05	0.69
11	Remains neutral as to task outcome	4.00	1.08
12	Focuses groups' attention on substantive issues in conflicts	4.00	0.80
13	Demonstrates evidence of advance planning & preparation	4.00	0.86
14	Stimulates group insights and creativity	4.00	0.86
15	Clarifies perspectives in disagreements	3.85	0.93
16	Adheres to established timeframes	3.85	0.81

Table 1. *Descriptive Results for Each Facilitator Competency (First group, n =20) Cont.*

Rank	Competency	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
17	Monitors group dynamics	3.75	0.85
18	Provides feedback and encourages process skills	3.45	0.76
19	Uses body language and non-verbals effectively	3.40	1.00
20	Uses humor effectively	3.21	1.03
21	Uses technology and visual aids appropriately	2.60	0.94

Note. Some of the competency statements were shortened for inclusion in the table. An example is Number 3, “Completes follow-up activities as contracted,” which was shortened to “Completes follow-up activities.” Care was taken to capture the meaning of each statement in the shortened version.

The top competencies from the first survey include: 1) Listens actively, 2) Keeps group focused on issues, and 3) Completes appropriate follow-up activities as contracted.

RQ2: What additional facilitator competencies do practitioners mention when given an opportunity to add to the list? We generated nine categories from the responses to this question with the number of responses in parentheses: 1) Personal characteristics (7), 2) Tactical issues (6), 3) Creating rapport / safe environment (5), 4) Communication (3), 5) Ownership of the group (3), 6) Prior knowledge/familiarity with the context (3), 7) Conflict (2), 8) Neutrality (2), and 9) Advance preparation (2). We determined that the statements classified under “Personal characteristics” and “Tactical issues” were either too general or too person- or context-specific for use in competency statements. However, this data along with short-answer data not reported in this paper will be used in further analysis. From the other categories, “Ownership of the group” and “Creating rapport / safe environment” were expanded into more concise language and added to the original 21 items, thus 23 items were rated in the second round of surveys.

RQ3: What rankings do a second sample of small group facilitators give to items included in a revised list of facilitator competencies provided to them? Ratings are presented in Table 2 in descending order of frequency.

Table 2. *Descriptive Results for Each Facilitator Competency (Second group, n =20)*

Rank	Competency	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	Listens actively	4.85	0.37
2	Creates a climate that supports interaction & discussion	4.75	0.44
3	Uses body language and non-verbals effectively	4.40	0.68
4	Encourages group involvement in and ownership of issues/task	4.35	0.81
5	Observes and attends to non-verbals in group members	4.25	0.55
5	Uses humor effectively	4.25	0.85
7	Handles disruptive individuals whose behavior is detrimental	4.15	0.67
7	Stimulates group insights and creativity	4.15	0.75
9	Uses questions skillfully	4.10	0.64
10	Monitors group dynamics	3.95	0.83
11	Helps group clarify purpose and establish ground rules	3.90	0.85
12	Maintains adherence to ground rules	3.80	0.95
13	Uses techniques appropriate for task and group	3.80	0.62
14	Paraphrases and summarizes segments of content	3.80	0.70
15	Clarifies perspectives in disagreements	3.75	0.85
16	Focuses groups’ attention on substantive issues in conflicts	3.70	0.57
17	Demonstrates evidence of advance planning & preparation	3.65	0.88
18	Provides feedback and encourage process skills	3.65	0.99
19	Keeps group focused on issues	3.60	0.82
20	Completes follow-up activities	3.40	0.88
21	Remains neutral as to task outcome	3.10	1.02
22	Adheres to established timeframes	3.05	0.76
23	Uses technology and visual aids appropriately	2.60	0.94

Results from Table 2 show the top three competencies as: 1) Listens actively, 2) Creates a climate that supports interaction & discussion, and 3) Uses body language and non-verbals effectively. In both groups, the competency of “listens actively” was rated as the most important competency of a small group facilitator.

RQ4: What framework of core competencies emerges from this data?

To determine our framework categories, we first examined the top 10 competencies from Round 1 and the top 12 competencies from Round 2. Twelve were considered for the second group to allow for the addition of the two competencies that emerged from the short-answer responses of the first group. The following six competencies appear in the top-10 list for both groups:

- Listens actively
- Handles disruptive individuals whose behavior is detrimental to the group
- Observes and attends to body language and non-verbal communication among group members
- Uses questions skillfully
- Helps group clarify purpose of meeting and establish ground rules
- Maintains adherence to ground rules.

The following two competencies emerged from Round 1, were added to the surveys in Round 2, and then were ranked in the top four competencies in Round 2:

- Creates a climate that supports interaction & discussion
- Encourages group involvement in and ownership of, issues and task.

These eight competencies appear in Figure 1 under the three cluster categories of communication, task, and relationship/climate. Adding a fourth category, organization, to our model allows all 23 competencies to be included.

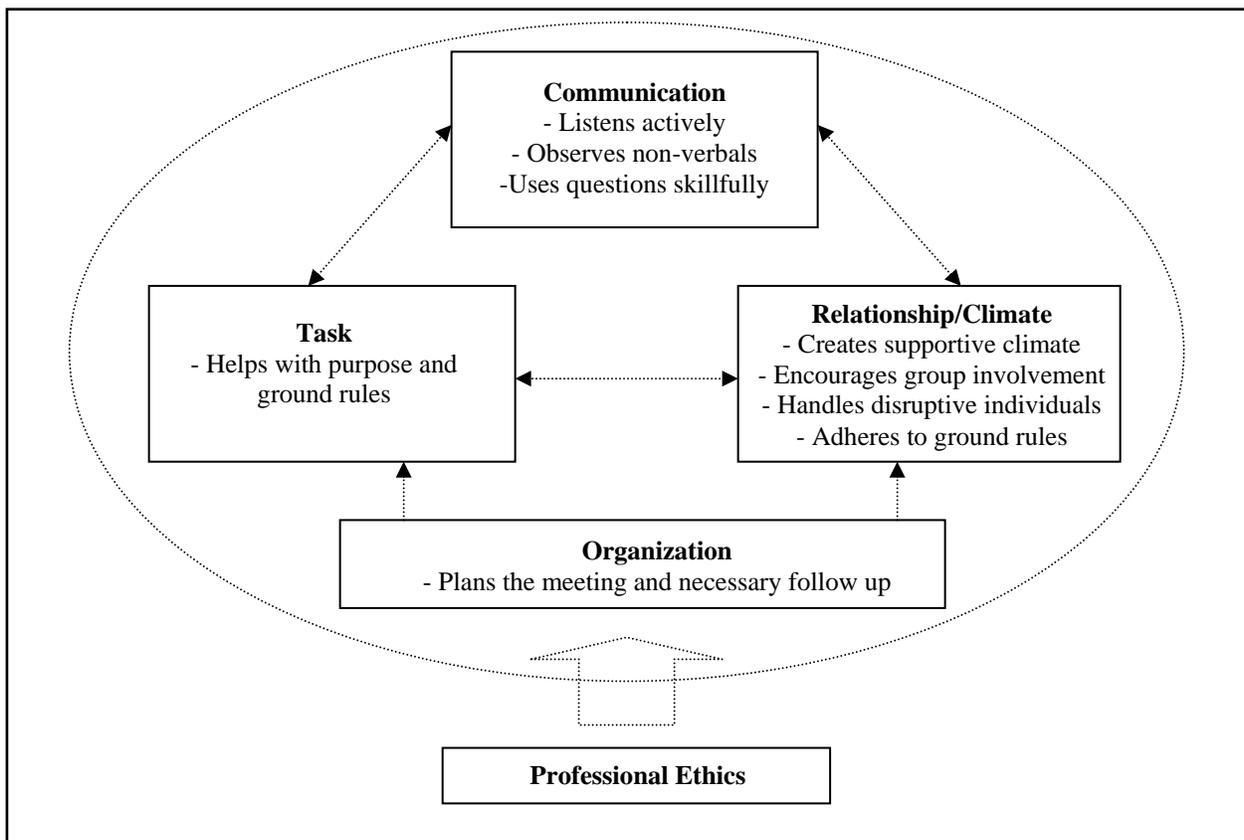


Figure 1. Framework of core facilitator competencies.

The arrows connecting communication, task, and relationship/climate clusters represent the interdependent and reciprocal relationship among these three clusters as reported in earlier work by Kelly and Thibaut (1954), Fisher (1980), and Engleberg and Wynn (1997), who refer only to the two dimensions of task and relationship. We believe that our three clusters are interdependent and reciprocal as indicated by the arrows. For example, encourages group involvement is placed under relationship/climate but it, and other competencies placed there, also require and influence competencies listed under task and communication. The three clusters and the competencies placed within each work holistically to influence group process. The model placement for organization indicates its importance in

supporting the other clusters. The placement of the professional ethics arrows indicates that professional ethics issues permeate the role of facilitator and serve as a backdrop for many decisions made by people in this role. This portion of the model will be further developed as data are analyzed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Consistent throughout the small group literature are the two categories of task and maintenance/relationship discussed in the theoretical framework section of this paper and also in describing our model. In applying and expanding this framework to the small group facilitator function, we find that the two categories of task and relationship remain relevant, especially if climate is added to expand the category of relationship. Central to the facilitator role is the cluster of competencies labeled communication. A person who does not listen attentively, observe and attend to non-verbal communication, and use questions skillfully will have a difficult time fulfilling the responsibilities of a facilitator. Likewise, a person who fails to attend to organizational issues throughout the facilitation and, specifically, to plan the meeting and perform necessary follow-up activities as contracted, will likely have a less than positive experience and outcome. The self-centered role identified by Engleberg and Wynn (1997) emerges in our competency of handling disruptive individuals. Thus, our proposed framework emerges from our data, is grounded in small group theory, and makes intuitive sense. The categories of communication, task, relationship/climate, and organization cover the primary tasks and competencies of the facilitator.

A training and development plan for facilitators can be developed from these categories. A combination of learning modalities seems particularly well suited for this purpose. Some competencies such as those in communication and relationship/climate clusters benefit from face-to-face practice and, optimally, time spent observing facilitators and serving as “second chair” to experienced facilitators. Eighty-three percent of the respondents in this study indicated that their preparation came from participating in and/or observing facilitation. However, only 28 percent received coaching by an experienced facilitator. Adding coaching to the second chair experience would add value to this learning opportunity. If facilitated groups could be videotaped, experienced and novice facilitators alike could learn from viewing and discussing the experience. Such videotaped sessions also would be useful for research purposes.

Relevant points from the vast literature on small group communication, facilitation techniques, conflict management, managing relationships, and contracting issues could be covered with selected readings made available electronically. Forty-three percent of the facilitators in our study used self-directed learning/readings to prepare themselves for their role of facilitator. In training situations, group work exercises, role plays, case studies, and videos of group meetings all provide useful information and experience on all facets of facilitation. Anyone who has worked with groups or teams knows that reading about how to handle a situation such as conflict and actually handling that situation are two different things. Knowledge is necessary but not sufficient for competence. Thirty-three percent of the facilitators in this study participated in formal training.

A caveat. A small group facilitator, however skillful and well prepared, can do only so much. Other essential components for team success must be in place. As we continue to develop this framework, we intend to consider factors external to the facilitator that influence the effect that facilitators have on group climate and performance. Factors such as organizational and supervisory support, time and resources available, personal characteristics and knowledge of group members, and others too numerous to mention affect the outcome of group and team efforts. Some of these factors were identified in the teamwork literature reported earlier.

This study collected data from facilitators and reflects their views of essential components. Data collected from group members, as well as from those who hire facilitators, would provide different and valuable perspectives.

Contribution to New Knowledge in HRD

Much of the literature cited in this paper, indeed much of the research on small groups and facilitation, stems from the social sciences field, and, in particular, the discipline of small group communication. Although people in HRD most likely are familiar with at least some of this literature, this paper serves to remind the reader of the early work on groups that is still useful today. Since the success of organizational teams is important to the productivity and climate of an organization, acquiring and disseminating knowledge in this field should allow HRD professionals to better equip those serving in the facilitator role. The framework reported here is a useful contribution to this effort. As we move forward and increasingly work with teams, both face-to-face and geographically dispersed, knowledge of how best to do this will be important to our field.

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