

Michael Wilkinson

CEO, LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

**NEW
+
REVISED**


THE
SECRETS
OF
Facilitation

**The SMART Guide
to Getting Results with Groups**

THE SECRETS OF FACILITATION

FREE
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New and Revised

THE SECRETS OF FACILITATION

The SMART Guide to Getting Results
with Groups

Michael Wilkinson

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THE JOSSEY-BASS Business & Management Series

To Mom, who taught me, and Pop, who inspired me



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INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

It has been eight years since the publication of the first edition of *The Secrets of Facilitation*. As the world around us has changed, so has the world of facilitation. This edition reflects some of these changes.

From many who read *The Secrets of Facilitation* I have heard comments about how the book has provided real foundation techniques for how to guide a team through a facilitated process. People frequently said they liked the numerous case studies and how the sample dialogues put them right into the room. I have been especially pleased with the numerous emails from people telling us how they have put the Secrets to use. We have also heard from many who have attended *The Effective Facilitator*, the training course that teaches the principles and techniques found in *The Secrets*. At the end of this Introduction to the Second Edition, I have included two of these letters.

Along with the positive feedback on *The Secrets*, we also have heard that more and more people are finding themselves facilitating “virtual meetings” where most of the people are not in the room. We also heard of extreme cases where the only one not in the room was the facilitator. People said they wanted more tips on how to facilitate large groups, more information about making meetings more productive, and greater guidance on preventing dysfunctional behavior.

Information from various surveys and research studies supports these needs.

- As an example, a landmark study on meetings by MCI (*Meetings in America: A Study of Trends, Costs and Attitudes Toward Business Travel and Teleconferencing, and Their Impact on Productivity*, 1998) revealed that busy professionals attend more than sixty meetings a month. Yet nearly all surveyed admitted to some sort of dysfunction during meetings: 91 percent admitted to

daydreaming, over 70 percent said they have brought other work to meetings, and 39 percent said they have dozed off during meetings.

- In a study by Carlson Wagonlit Travel’s Travel Management Institute (*Meetings and Events: Where Savings Meet Success*, 2010), over 80 percent indicated that the number of virtual meetings is growing in their organizations.
- In my article “The Case for Masterful Meetings” (2006), I have documented that with a team of twenty people who spend an average of thirteen hours a week in meetings, just a 15 percent increase in the productivity of meetings is equivalent to adding another person to the team.

What’s New in the Second Edition?

A lot! *The Secrets of Facilitation—New and Revised* responds to the aforementioned needs and more. I have kept the features people have said they liked, and in this edition you will also find

- Four new chapters, covering
 - Virtual meetings
 - Facilitating large groups and conferences
 - Facilitating cross-cultural groups
 - Building an in-house network of facilitators
- Ten engagement strategies that we teach to advanced facilitators:
 - Brief encounters
 - Dump and clump
 - Elevator speech
 - Forced analogy
 - Future letter
 - Last person standing
 - More of / Less of
 - Start / Stop / Continue
 - Talking stick
 - The whip
- Ten new secrets covering the following topics:
 - Defining the session product: the 3 Hs
 - Managing a sponsor’s presence
 - Exciting people in the opening
 - Gaining consensus on wording
 - Preparing for a virtual meeting
 - Facilitating large groups

- Facilitating conferences
- Managing time with speakers
- Facilitating cross-cultural groups
- Establishing an internal facilitator cadre
- Fifteen additional case studies, including
 - The facilitator's role in civic leadership groups
 - The starting question to engage the VP's number two
 - Preparing for vision councils
 - The power of the pen, ELMO, and parking boards
 - The low-key facilitator
 - The virtual strategy monitoring session
 - Facilitating a conference on spirituality
 - Facilitating the strategic plan for a Caribbean government
 - The pull strategy at Hydro One
 - The facilitator development program at Saudi Aramco
- Expanded information on handling dysfunctions, including how to prevent the dysfunction, what to do in the moment when you are facing the dysfunction, and what to do after the moment
- An expanded list of dysfunctions, which adds the following five:
 - Cell phone junkie
 - Topic jumper
 - Interrupter
 - Low-energy group
 - Time-pressured group
- New material on numerous topics, including
 - Applying the Secrets to running a simple meeting
 - Applying the Secrets to the first meeting of a task force
 - Should the sponsor be in the room?
 - When should you arrive for a meeting?
 - How to get executives to turn their power over to you
 - How facilitators abuse the pen
 - The informed majority decision-making process
 - Energy and authenticity
 - Crossing the River: my favorite team building activity
 - Defining what can be communicated following the session
 - A tool for improving your cross-cultural awareness by identifying your cultural biases
 - Interrupting the effects of institutional power through facilitation
 - Facilitator neutrality: fact or fiction?
 - Facilitator certification

- A new feature answering the question, “Why do this?” to highlight why a particular approach or strategy is so critically important
- Recommended exercises at the end of each chapter to suggest ways to practice one or more key concepts covered in the chapter

In summary, you will find in this second edition a wealth of new information, along with the foundational structure that made the first edition such a big success. I am excited about this new edition and what it has to offer. Our company’s tagline is “Sharing the Power of Facilitation with the World.” We fundamentally believe that facilitation is a powerful tool for helping people reach better decisions, often faster, with much higher levels of buy-in and commitment.

- Better decisions . . . because a diversity of views were openly shared and considered
- Often faster . . . because the processes used promote productive and efficient communication
- Much higher levels of buy-in and commitment . . . because those impacted by the decisions were involved in creating them

My hope is that this second edition will both empower you and inspire you to “share the power” with the groups you serve.

Michael Wilkinson
Managing Director, Leadership Strategies
Sharing the Power of Facilitation with the World™

CASE STUDY: The Secrets in Action—How Two Practitioners Have Put the Secrets to Work

Andy Weavill is a freelance management and training consultant based in the United Kingdom.

The Secrets of Facilitation delivered success for me at a recent series of conferences. I had been engaged on a project with a large public sector organization going through a tremendous period of change. They had commissioned me to put together a series of three large group conferences (260 people, 200, and 150) to engage their people in discussion about the changes, to share information and celebrate past successes.

My primary role on the day was to open the conference and engage delegates in thinking about the future and formulating questions and observations to put to various speakers throughout the day. Thereafter my role was to facilitate the question-and-answer sessions and generally keep the conference moving along. Getting the opening right was crucial to the success of the day.

The first two conferences were deemed to be successful, but I knew that although the level of participation was reasonable, it could be better, with more questions and more people asking them from the floor. Also I felt, due to the uncertainties of change, I hadn't managed to create the rapport and warmth in the room I would have liked. By the end of the day it was still a little frosty!

Prior to the third conference, I had ordered and received *The Secrets of Facilitation*. The book arrived on the Monday, two days before the last conference. I read it Monday evening and Tuesday in readiness for the third conference on Wednesday. My motivation: Were there any secrets I could apply to improve my opening pitch, generate more involvement, and more questions? By Tuesday afternoon I had read the book, and my attention was focused on Chapters Two and Four, The Secrets to Questioning and The Secrets to Starting, and to some extent on Chapter Three, The Secrets to Preparing. I also had in mind secret 19 (using PeDeQs for my direction giving) and secret 30 (the secret to Q&A sessions). Late Tuesday afternoon, I rewrote and replanned my opening to better focus it around the IEEI outline and set up the participation for Q&A by following the steps outlined in secret 30.

I applied the Secrets on Wednesday morning at the third conference and noted the reactions. The opening flowed better, and a greater level of rapport was achieved. The opening also established greater involvement and participation in the pre-questioning process and sequence. During the Q&A, more questions were asked than at the other two conferences—and these kept coming throughout the day. The PeDeQs sequence for giving directions also improved understanding and execution of activities throughout the day.

I might be biased, but at the end of the day I felt the mood of delegates was not as frosty as it was at the other two conferences, and subsequent analysis of conference evaluations showed that, in comparison to the other two conferences, we had improved on *all* our ratings. The client also thought that this had been the best of the three conferences. Of course, I could put this improvement down to familiarity with the conference process (it was the third one, after all)—but I don't think so. I had made sufficient changes (based on my reading of *The Secrets of Facilitation*) to the way I facilitated the third conference to know that these changes—some process, some change in words and/or emphasis—had made the difference.

As I sit here and reflect on all three conferences, I would also like to make the point that had we really followed the five Ps of preparation with the client, putting together the conference agenda would have been easier; and if we had focused on probable issues to a greater extent than we did, I am convinced our conference process would also have been different.

So overall, I have had a great learning opportunity and experience helped in no small measure by *The Secrets of Facilitation*—the book really does deliver!

Jason Kean is a project coordinator with one of the largest used car Web sites in the United States, with more than two million used vehicles listed for sale by private owners, dealers, and manufacturers. Jason attended The Effective Facilitator, the training course that covers the content in The Secrets of Facilitation.

Let me start by telling you how much I truly appreciated The Effective Facilitator class. I have used the principles I learned during this course in all aspects of life, both personally and

professionally. The only instance in my life that has remained unaltered by the class is my relationship with my dog (she just doesn't get it!).

Having facilitated several meetings with executives and coworkers, I now run more effective idea meetings and accomplish specific objectives. I've learned it's highly effective when the goal is clearly stated and used to keep the group focused.

In addition, I ask direct questions and am getting better responses. I've also found I'm better able to read audience "nonverbal cues" and now have a toolbox full of strategies I can use to engage audience participation in conversations. This makes for highly effective meetings and works great on Sunday mornings when I'm teaching high school kids who are still waking up!

Not only do I feel a personal change as a result of the course, but others have seen a change in me as well. My boss has noticed a difference in the way I conduct sessions. My meetings are more successful because I know how to address and resolve conflicts immediately, I can identify distracting behaviors and redirect them before they are out of control, and I know my process cold so I can take a tangent, come back to my original point, and end my meetings on time, every time.

When not leading meetings, I find I'm a better listener and more active participant because I now recognize what it takes to turn a "good" meeting into a "great" meeting. It's awesome that my company understands the value of offering this kind of training to our staff. It is knowledge I can use in every aspect of my life.



INTRODUCTION: A POWERFUL SECRET

Professional facilitators know a *powerful secret*.

What makes it a secret? Certainly not the number of people who know it. In fact, there are probably many who would say they are aware of 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 it is linked to effectiveness and human motivation.

CASE STUDY: Learning the Powerful Secret

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’s problem. We might be called in to review a particular department or activity. We would arrive with our army of bright people, interview those who 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 percent solution.” We would go away and come back a year later, and, if we were lucky, perhaps 15 percent of our recommendations would be implemented.

In my final years with that organization, the practice in which I worked began taking a different, more facilitative 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 eight to twenty people. In the facilitated sessions, the participants—not the consultants—would create the recommendations. In most cases, they would come up with what we might consider only the 60 or 70 percent 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 consider the 85 percent solution. Yet when we came back a year later, amazingly 80 to 90 percent of the solution would be implemented!

Why wasn't more of the 100 percent solution implemented? Why did the 85 percent solution gained through facilitation achieve far greater success? Therein lies the secret and the power behind it.

Secret #1

The Fundamental Secret of Facilitation

You can achieve more effective results when solutions are created, understood, and accepted by the people impacted.

Prior to my grasping the secret, facilitating groups was about 10 percent 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 skill. 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 power of the secret even more apparent.

Case Study: The Sanitation Workers

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 pickup crews. Yet 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. Therefore, the director called us in to help facilitate the development of 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 director 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 on 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 outcomes, critical success factors, approach, scheduling, and budgeting, among other topics. Although many of the 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 the team's facilitators, we often used questioning 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. In the end, the team created a comprehensive plan whose benefits were clearly delineated. They were very proud of their work.

The team members (not the facilitators) presented their plan to the mayor and his cabinet. We coached the team on presentation skills, group question-and-answer techniques, and other methods to help ensure effectiveness. 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, set of recommendations, and justification he had ever received from an employee work team. The recommendations, almost in their entirety, were implemented.

Consider the sanitation workers and their state of mind after investing their hearts and souls in creating their solution. They had two major concerns the night before the presentation. Of course, there was the internal fear of presenting so poorly that they would fall flat on their faces—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 director of sanitation had made it *their* plan: they owned it, and they were ready to sell it to the mayor and to their coworkers.

In contrast, before the Big 8 firm implemented facilitation techniques, the consultants created the solution. It was, in essence, the *consultants'* solution. The employees felt little ownership. When the workers created it, it was *their* solution. Admittedly, the workers agreed to only the 85 percent solution. But which results would you rather have? Very little of 100 percent or nearly all of 85 percent?

In his book *Transforming the Mature Information Technology Organization*, Dr. Robert Zawacki from the University of Colorado put the secret this way:

$$ED = RD \times CD$$

That is, an **E**ffective **D**ecision equals the **R**ight **D**ecision *multiplied by* the level of **C**ommitment to the **D**ecision. The multiplication sign in Dr. Zawacki's formula means that even the best decision can be rendered completely ineffective if commitment to the decision is lacking. A group of consultants might have created the 100 percent solution for the Sanitation Bureau, but if the workers did not buy in to the solution, the effectiveness of the solution would have been near zero.

Learning to Apply the Fundamental Secret

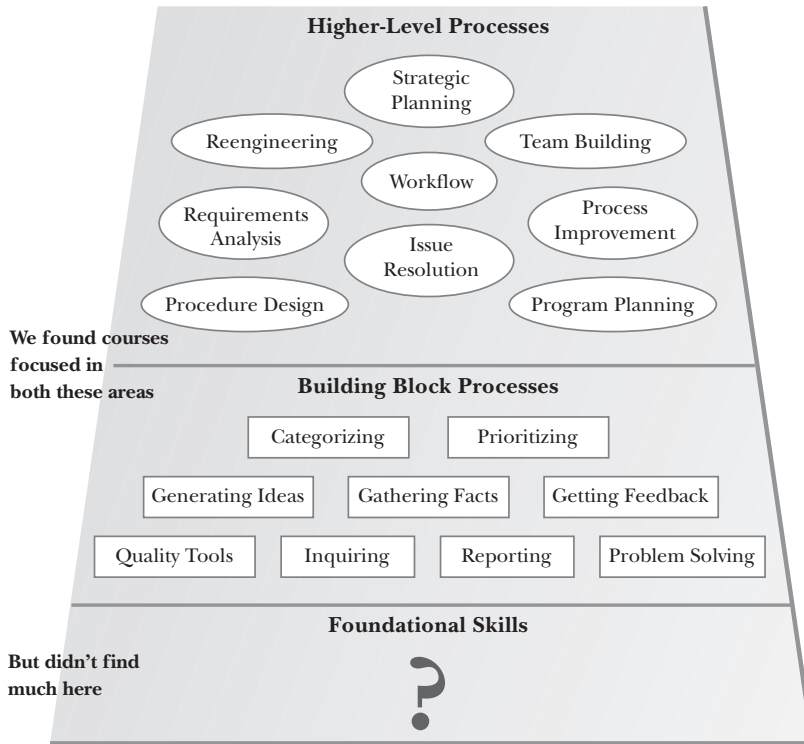
Of course, the secret is not complicated. Remember, however, that although many know the secret, few truly understand how to apply it and how to unleash the power that is available when you get people together to develop solutions that will work for them. For example, few understand

- How to get people excited about participating in a solution process
- How to keep people focused and engaged
- How to ask questions that challenge without alienating
- How to guide a team without overpowering it
- How to address disagreements and build consensus
- How to deal with people who drop out, dominate, or demonstrate other dysfunctional behaviors that can be disruptive
- How to ensure that you gain commitment to action

These are foundational facilitation skills that help groups achieve amazing results. In early 1993, we at Leadership Strategies set out to find a facilitation training course that taught these skills. We found many courses that focused on facilitating higher-level processes, such as strategic planning and requirements analysis. We also found courses that provided instruction in building-block methods and processes, such as quality tools and problem-solving techniques. For the most part, they were terrific courses. Yet generally they did not thoroughly address the foundational skills that made great facilitators superb at their trade. Some courses covered concepts related to group dynamics. But often these courses explained the result that was desired (for example, helping the group move to consensus) without providing details on how to create the result. The foundational skills seemed to be missing, as shown in Figure I.1.

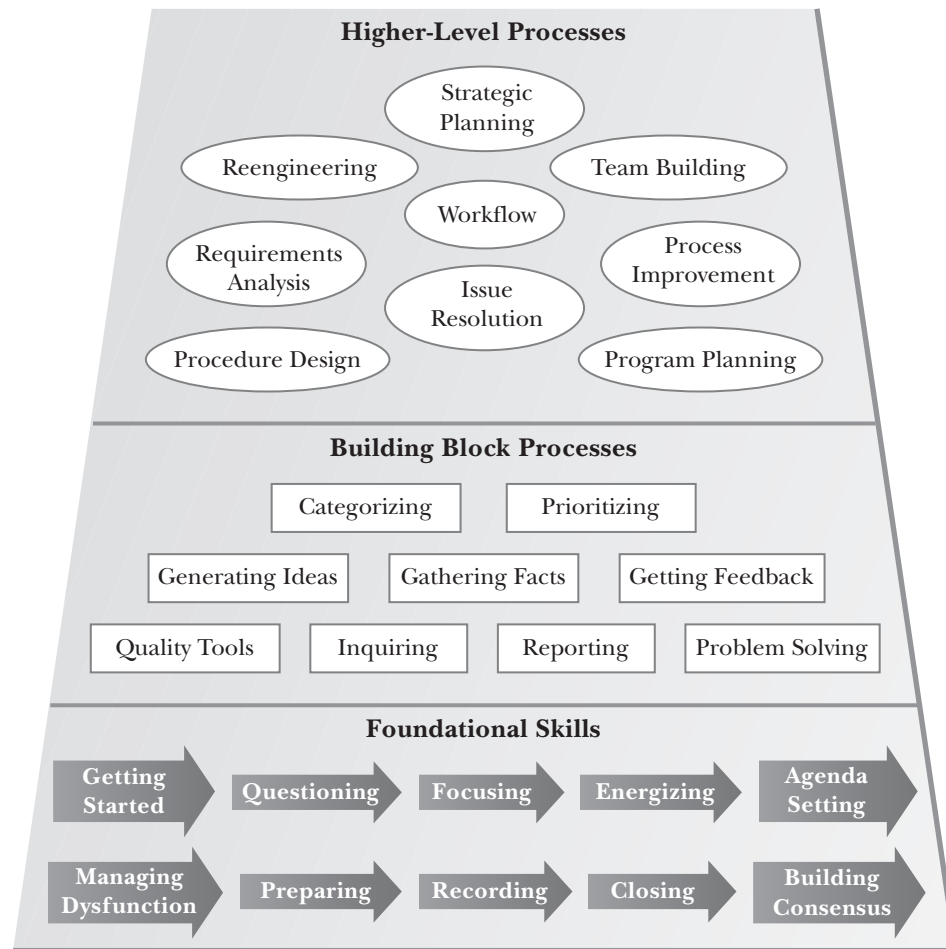
We believed that facilitation was an art but that there was a science to the art. We believed that at the foundation of facilitation there had to be a methodology that facilitators use, even if they were unaware of it. We were intent on discovering the methodology and developing training materials to support it.

To learn what we needed, we interviewed veteran facilitators who were considered among the best in their areas of expertise. We asked them four specific questions:

FIGURE I.1 THE FOCUS OF MOST FACILITATION COURSES.

Our Questions to Veteran Facilitators

- When you are facilitating and things are going well, what are you doing? What are the techniques and processes you use to get the group involved, interacting, and achieving results?
- If you were going to send those who worked with you to a facilitation class, what are the key topics and techniques you would want them to learn?
- What are some of the classic mistakes you have seen facilitators make? During those times when you were in the back of the room and someone else was facilitating, what were the things that the facilitator did or didn't do that made you uncomfortable, irritated you, or made you want to jump up and run the session yourself?
- Although you are considered a very good facilitator, surely there are areas in which you would like to be better skilled. What are the situations for which you need better techniques? Consider sessions you facilitated where something didn't go as well as you would have liked. What are those areas for which additional tools would make you an even better facilitator?

FIGURE I.2 FOUNDATIONAL SKILL AREAS.

From the information gained in these interviews, we identified what we believe are the foundational skill areas for facilitators, as shown in Figure I.2.

The Principles of SMART Facilitation

We were very excited to uncover these foundational skill areas. From this base, we formulated a structured facilitation methodology that we call SMART Facilitation: **Structured Meeting and Relating Techniques**. SMART Facilitation is based on eleven principles that provide SMART facilitators with a clear vision of facilitation excellence. Supporting the principles are specific strategies and techniques that demonstrate how SMART facilitators execute the principles in practice. Together, the principles and techniques constitute a comprehensive methodology for SMART Facilitation that can be used to produce consistent, repeatable results. Figure I.3 shows the overall structure of SMART Facilitation.