Facilitate a Series of Stakeholder Meetings

Overview:
This module is another in a series on group facilitation techniques. I have used group facilitation for many years as a way to effectively and efficiently engage those who have a stake in the outcome a project. My name is Joe Goss, a Senior Business Analyst for the Project Management Office at DoIT. I would like you to achieve three learning outcomes through this module. The first is the value of facilitated stakeholder meetings over one-on-one interviews. Second, I want to share with you a successful process I have used repeatedly for my projects. Lastly, I want to pass along the tips I have learned to help create a productive project team through facilitated meetings. Click the next button to continue.

Serial Interviews:
Early in my career as a business analyst, I routinely conducted one-on-one stakeholder interviews as the primary source for eliciting requirements. Before my first interview in a project, I usually created a list of questions to ask each stakeholder. However, I found that the questions I asked of subsequent stakeholders evolved. As a result, I often met a second time with those who I previously interviewed for answers to the new questions. I was also hearing in each interview only one perspective on the business problem, making it difficult for me to see a coherent picture of the whole. As you may know, it is important to follow up an interview with typed notes for corrections. I discovered the difficulty of getting timely feedback on these necessary corrections to my notes.

I also found that serial interviews take a long time – one to two weeks of elapsed time, given the busy schedules of even a half-dozen stakeholders. Lastly, I realized how much could be gained by having the stakeholders together in the same room, sharing ideas, and building upon each other's innovations. When I learned about the advantages of group facilitation, I knew I had to learn more. What are those advantages? A well-facilitated meeting encourages open discussion, collaboration, common agreement, insight, and commitment – all at a pace faster than could be achieved through serial stakeholder interviews. In this learning module, I will help you understand the process for planning, staging, and executing facilitated group meetings. Click the next button to get started.

High Level View of the Steps:
As you work through this material, you will see several sections of a process flowchart. This flowchart uses a set of symbols from a modeling language called Business Process Modeling and Notation. While there is a separate learning module that introduces this modeling technique, I will briefly introduce the symbols used here. Right now would be a good time to print a copy of the flowchart available from this link. Press the "Next" button when you have a printed copy.

The flowchart on this page is often called a "swim lane" diagram. Notice the four long "lanes" that stretch horizontally across the page. Each of these represents a role in the process. You can see the "Facilitator" lane, for example. Most of the symbols on this diagram are rectangles with rounded corners. These are called "tasks," each representing a specific activity in the process. I numbered each task to help to you find it as we work through this module. Notice how each task is positioned in one or more swim lanes. This positioning indicates which role or roles are responsible for a task. For example, task "7. Hold Kickoff Meeting" is the responsibility of the sponsor, facilitator, and project team. Notice that the flowchart starts and ends with a circle. The diamond shape indicates a simple "yes/no" decision. Each dog-eared page in the diagram represents a document, such as a Project Charter or a Project Plan. By the way, you can learn much more about diagrams of this type from the "Introduction to Process Modeling" module.

While there are many details associated with each of the tasks in this process flow, I have summarized the steps in this diagram to help you understand the overall process. Click the next button to continue.

Where to Start?
Let's assume that you've been asked to guide a new project team in addressing a problem facing a department. You are not familiar with this functional area and its operations. In addition, the problem facing the department is not well defined. Neither are the project scope and its objectives. You may fear this ambiguity will cause the project to fail. What should you do to help the stakeholders succeed in the project? Click the next button to learn about the steps I recommend.

1. Learn the Lingo
Let's begin with "Learn the Lingo." In my own business analysis practice, I have proven many times that I can successfully facilitate a team of stakeholders without being an expert in the functional area we are exploring. However, I must be able to converse fluently with the jargon these stakeholders use. I have to "know the lingo," so to speak. I must also understand the business problem and its context – what is the effect of this problem on the organization? Lastly, I need a high-level understanding of the department's operational processes. I don't need to know the process details, but I have to be familiar at a high-level with the department's inputs, outputs, and processes. For example, if I were facilitating a team to develop requirements for a purchasing system, I would need to understand the terms "invoice" and "purchase order" <u>and</u> how these documents are used within the purchasing process. Understanding the language, the business problem, and operational processes will help you engage confidently with the functional experts on your team.

You may wonder, "How is it possible to facilitate a group successfully with this limited knowledge?" In the facilitator role, you are responsible for capturing the wisdom of stakeholders. You have to have just enough knowledge to successfully capture, organize, clarify, probe, resolve, communicate, interrelate, and correlate stakeholders' wisdom. In essence, you are providing the medium for knowledge sharing, not the knowledge itself. Click on the next button to continue.

2. Agree on Objectives
As you may know, a project charter serves as the cornerstone for a successful project. The charter describes as accurately as possible the business problem, as well as background information, objectives, project approach, and risks. You have perhaps heard the phrase "velocity without vector," which is a shorthand way of describing a project underway that lacks direction. The project charter gives "vector" to the project as directional guidance for project activity or "velocity." As a standard practice, I develop a charter for every project I lead – whether as a project manager, business analyst, or group facilitator. This slide lists the elements of a basic charter template. The link to the Project Management Advisor at the bottom of the slide offers a template for a robust charter. Click the next button when you are ready to continue.

Facilitate a Series of Stakeholder Meetings

Sample Project Charter:
The project charter can also be thought of as a contract between you and the project sponsor. Using information gained through interviews with the sponsor and perhaps a few stakeholders, I draft a charter document and share it with those I interviewed. The text on this slide is a charter excerpt from a project to elicit operational requirements for a large system. As I meet with the sponsor and others, I share the importance of common agreement on project objectives. With their feedback on the draft, I "finalize" the charter and share it again with the group. The word "finalize" is perhaps a misnomer here, as the charter should be viewed as a living document, evolving as the project proceeds. This behavior is common in business analysis projects, where the initial focus of the work commonly evolves. In fact, I have sometimes scrapped the first project charter altogether because my subsequent work with the sponsor helped us more accurately define the true problem we were facing. Click the next button to continue.

Observations of Successful Teams:
I continue to be amazed at the accomplishments of a project team that includes representative stakeholders with diverse perspectives and backgrounds. In his book, "The Wisdom of Crowds," James Surowieki summarizes some characteristics of a successful team. First, that diversity of opinion is the single best guarantee that the team will reap benefits from face-to-face discussion. Second, that a non-polarized team consistently makes better decisions and comes up with better answers than most of the team's individual members, and surprisingly often, the team outperforms the capabilities of even its best members. Lastly, that there is no correlation between the performance of the smartest person in the team and the performance of that team. These are all reasons why a diverse team is important. Click the next button to continue.

3. Create a Diverse Team
As you work with the sponsor, emphasize the importance of having stakeholders with different perspectives on the business problem. If the project is likely to propose a technical solution, it may help to include the lead developer and the technical project manager on the project team. Doing so helps them understand the business problem and processes, as well as the business language and the solution requirements. In my projects, the sponsor typically picks the team members, but I always ask the sponsor for information about each nominee. What is each person's current role and background? How is each nominee affected by the business problem? Does a nominee have a particular bias, such as resistance to technology or organizational change? Who else might be nominated? Why wasn't a particular person included? Are the nominees' perspectives representative of the larger organization? Taken as a whole, does the team reflect the breadth of expertise needed to address the business problem? Are there any longstanding conflicts between any of the nominees? These questions help ensure your team will have diverse and representative membership. Click the next button when you are ready to continue.

Invite Participation:
In meeting with the sponsor, I always share my expectations for team members' time commitment, typically as the number of hours per week I believe each team member will need to dedicate to the project. This expectation is a preliminary estimate because I haven't yet planed the project approach. I encourage you to err on the high side of an estimate, as it is much easier to reduce the time expectation than increase it. I also indicate that team members will be asked to complete work independently, outside of team meetings. My estimate of weekly time commitments includes work both inside and outside of meetings.

Facilitate a Series of Stakeholder Meetings

Once the Sponsor decides the makeup of the team, ask him or her to send an e-mail invitation to each team member. The invitation should summarize the goals of the project, indicate why the invitee is needed for project success, and set expectations for a time commitment. Click the next button to continue.

4. Plan the Approach – Goals, Tasks, and Barriers
Group facilitation is often used to elicit requirements for a process improvement, an information technology solution, or an organizational transformation. While the charter identifies the goals of the elicitation project, you should also develop a plan to describe "how" those goals will be achieved. Like any other plan, it should include a sequenced set of tasks. I find it valuable to think about what results must accomplished at each meeting. In planning, it may help to think about the final projected meeting of the team and then work backwards in time. Once I identify the "deliverables" for each meeting, I can determine a rough agenda for it. Next, I think about the specific work activities required to create each deliverable. For example, if the team needs to identify and resolve conflicts between a set of requirements, I figure out a good way to display the requirements for the team to review and resolve. I also plan how to organize the materials so the team can accomplish that task efficiently and effectively. I document the work tasks in a spreadsheet, project planning tool, or process flow, such as the example shown here.

Finally, I review the plan for potential roadblocks, thinking about what I may have left out, estimating the time each task will take, verifying that the sequence of tasks makes sense, and looking for points where the team may struggle. As I assess the potential for these barriers, I think about the talents and capability gaps of each team member. If I have a process flow diagram for the project, I share it with the project team. They may have great ideas for reducing work through shortcuts and efficiencies. Click the next button to continue.

Plan the Approach – sample:
This slide contains a portion of a narrative plan. I included both the project objective and process used for the project. Take a moment and review this example. Click the next button when you are ready to proceed.

Plan the Approach – meeting place:
As you look at the plan, think about good places to meet with the team. Consider the number of attendees, room furniture and configuration, wall space, dry erase boards, and flipchart stands. Use a meeting space large enough for the whole team, but which also accommodates the formation of small work groups. If team members will be using the wall space for work, be certain they will have enough room to mingle and move freely between the furniture and the wall. Also, consider comfort – chairs, windows, as well as access to water, vending machines, and restrooms.

Think about team members who work in a remote location. If they will be travelling to meet at a central place, help make their trip hassle-free. Often you can ask an administrative assistant for help on behalf of remote team members – information about hotel, directions, parking, and restaurants, for example. In this age of improving remote communication capability, it may be possible to eliminate travel for some remote team members through a video and audio link. While this approach may work well for brainstorming, remote attendees cannot engage to the same extent as local team members, such as with the sifting and sorting of paper, which is a common activity in facilitated meetings. Click the next button to continue.

Plan the Approach – engagement:
It is sometimes difficult to sustain the energy and enthusiasm of a facilitated team. Interest often lags during a long meeting, or in a meeting right after lunch, or in a room that is uncomfortably warm. Keep an eye on the participants. When I notice someone yawning, daydreaming, or checking phone messages, I may need to give the whole group a short break. I can have the team transition to a physical activity that engages everyone – writing, sorting, sifting, building, pairing up, etc. I have found it helpful to give the team a break every hour. Within that hour, I try to mix thinking tasks such as brainstorming with physical activities, such as grouping sticky notes from the brainstorming. In my planning for a meeting, I think of the concept of the mind as a muscle – and design activities for a "warm up," a workout, and a "cool down." Suppose the group has just made a transition to a new topic. To promote a good workout through a brainstorming exercise, I might have the team members pair-up and share a story about the topic. As a cool down from the brainstorm workout, I might ask the group to review what we accomplished and identify action items. As a final step in the overall planning, I consider how the output from each meeting serves to create success for subsequent meetings, making any needed adjustments to the plan. Click the next button to continue.

5. Build Relationships - define context:
Strong, trusting relationships between the facilitator and team members are critical to project success. I discovered an easy way to lay the foundation for good relationships with team members. Before the kickoff meeting, I call each team member and ask about their interests and concerns about the project. I start the phone call by defining the context of my interruption to their workday. I refer to the Sponsors' invitation to the kickoff and ask if we can chat for 10 minutes or so. I want the conversation be positive and engaging, conveying my enthusiasm for his or her involvement in the project. These steps help me start a valuable conversation. Click the next button to continue.

5. Build Relationships – ask and listen:
I continue the conversation by asking about the team member – their current job and responsibilities. I ask about the business problem identified in the project charter – what frustrates them and what challenges they see in finding a problem solution. I listen very carefully to what they are communicating, not only the content, but also the tone their voice. As far as possible, I help them explore the business problem from their perspective. It helps to ask open-ended questions, such as "What do you feel we ought to accomplish in this project?" and "How might we best overcome the challenges we face?" I summarize to him or her what I heard in response to these questions. I jot down notes about key points as the conversation proceeds. These notes are helpful to me as I prepare for the kickoff meeting. I want to know what may motivate the team member, as well as any predisposition he or she may have. For example, the team member may be technology adverse, be over-reliant on technology, or be adverse to change. By asking open-ended questions, these perspectives are often revealed. In the course of the project, I may need to help this team member work through this predisposition. There is one more slide on building relationships. Click the next button to proceed.

5. Build Relationships – expectations:

Facilitate a Series of Stakeholder Meetings

In the last part of my conversation with the team member, I talk briefly about the upcoming kickoff meeting. Although we may not have a date for the meeting, I promise to share that date when it is known. I also want to remind the team member about our expectations for his or her time commitment, and indicate that some work outside of meetings will be necessary. Next, I ask if the team member has any additional concerns to share. I listen carefully, acknowledging and addressing the concern, as I am able. Finally, I thank the team member for their time and bid farewell. This 10-minute phone conversation helps the team member feel welcome and appreciated, and creates the foundation of a good relationship. Click on the next button to learn about staging the kickoff meeting.

6. Stage the Kickoff Meeting:
First impressions in a new project are very important. I strive to create through the kickoff meeting a sense of purpose and enthusiasm among the team members. Of course, getting everyone on the team in the same room at the same time can be a challenge. Many times, I have used a free web service called "Doodle," available at www.doodle.com. I simply identify the dates and times I am available, and then Doodle gives me a link I can share with team members. Each person follows this link to the site, reviews the available times, and indicates those that he or she can attend. When everyone has indicated their availability, I can look at the Doodle site and find the best match for a meeting time.

Setting up the logistics for a meeting can be a challenge. As far as possible, utilize the professional services of an administrative assistant. Given your parameters, that person can find a meeting room, schedule meals, handle hotel reservations, and reserve parking spots, for example.

A written agenda is critical to the success of the kickoff meeting. I find it valuable to draft an agenda and share it with the sponsor for suggestions and improvements. Send the agenda far enough in advance so that participants can be fully prepared to participate in the meeting. If I am facing a complex kickoff meeting, I will also produce a detailed agenda containing notes to myself about staging, transitions, and reminders.

By having the sponsor attend the kickoff meeting, he or she will have an opportunity to show enthusiasm for the project and its outcome, to sanction the team's work, and perhaps to address attendees' concerns. Click the next button to continue.

7. Hold Kickoff Meeting – start the project:
I try to include at a minimum the agenda items that appear on this slide. There is a good chance that someone in the room does not know someone else. As the facilitator, I often do not know everyone myself. It helps to associate a person with each voice I heard on the phone during my interviews of team members. Ask each person to identify themselves and perhaps his or her current department and role. I have a hard time connecting names to faces sometimes. I handle that in the kickoff meeting by jotting down the name of each person in turn, as he or she gives an introduction, creating a hand-written seating chart for myself.

Give the sponsor five to ten minutes to introduce the project, to share the reasons it will benefit the organization, and to share enthusiastic confidence in the team members.

Facilitate a Series of Stakeholder Meetings

Introduce the team to the logistics of the work they will do. Perhaps you have set up a repository for the team's work products. Work out the schedule of upcoming meeting dates and times. Describe how the meetings will be structured. Indicate that each meeting will have agenda available beforehand, a "to do" list by the end, and meeting minutes afterward.

Use the draft project charter to share and discuss the team's goals and the work plan. In my projects, the charter is often in draft form at the time of kickoff meeting. Help the team review this document and refine it. The sponsor can often resolve team member concerns about the project.

I encourage you to work with the team to define some rules for team meetings. I like to use a flip chart page, which can be hung up again at future meetings. It will help team members suggest their own rules if I "seed" the list ahead of the meeting with a few suggestions - "do not interrupt others" and "listen fully," for example. Write down the team members' additions to the rule list. These ground rules will set a positive tone at future meetings. Here is another reason for the sponsor to attend the kickoff meeting. Click the next button when you are ready for the next slide.

7. Hold Kickoff Meeting – the work:
Be sure to reiterate expectations for weekly time commitment and work outside of meetings.

While I may need to learn vocabulary to understand the team members' functional areas, I also need to share with them the meaning of my business analysis jargon. For example, I often use the terms "requirement" and "stakeholder." The team will benefit from an understanding of the terms I use.

If possible, I include in the agenda a work item for the team. Seeing the team accomplish a task helps the sponsor gain confidence in the project. A work activity also gives team members in the presence of the sponsor both a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of forward momentum.

As I work through the agenda, I am typically standing at a dry erase board or flip chart pad after the sponsor's message. I listen carefully for potential "to do" items and jot those down for all to see. The last item on the meeting agenda should be a review of the draft "to do" items. A work item is more likely to be completed if someone is assigned to that task and a deadline identified for it. The "Who/What/When" technique, a separate module in this series, is an excellent way to achieve this outcome. Click the next button to continue to the next process step.

8. Facilitator Work between Meetings
This slide and the next one describe a number of important work tasks for the facilitator between meetings. I want to emphasize a few of these.

As you circulate results from the past meeting such as minutes and work products, be sure to ask team members for improvements and suggestions. You are more likely to receive responses from the team if you indicate a deadline for feedback. Click the next button to continue with more notes about facilitator work between meetings.

Between meetings, I have found it very beneficial to contact each team member by phone and ask a few questions, "How do you feel about what we accomplished in the last meeting?" and

"What could we have improved?", for example. This also a great opportunity to remind them about work they volunteered to complete. I find it helpful to ask if they feel like they have what they need to accomplish the assigned task. While a team member is responsible for the work assigned to them, I am responsive to each team member's needs. I help ensure that he or she can complete the work by its deadline.

The time between meetings is also valuable for considering the status of the project. I think about the overall work plan and how the team is progressing along it. It may be appropriate for me to propose some adjustments. I look for efficiency opportunities and ways to eliminate non-value work, as well as ways in which the team can be more effective. For example, I might split the team in two at the next meeting and have them work on two separate tasks. This approach has the effect of doubling our pace for that period. Click the next button to continue.

9. Facilitate Team Meeting

The work necessary for this step is similar to that for the kickoff meeting. I'll give you a moment to review this list. I won't cover all of the points here, but I'll focus on logistics for a moment. As you facilitate a meeting, watch for signals from attendees. Look for individuals who are learning back, yawning, checking the clock, day dreaming, or scanning e-mail. These are all signals the team needs a short break. While you are facilitating, monitor the behavior of team members and do what is necessary to reengage them.

The meeting agenda should include team consideration of progress toward the project goals. Notice step 10 of the process flow. I thought it best to show this assessment as step 10, but a team meeting is a perfect time to consider this evaluation.

The work products of a meeting are critical to the success of subsequent work. Therefore as a facilitator, I must ensure the team produces high quality results. At every opportunity during the meeting, I look for ambiguous, incomplete, and conflicting information. Often I scan the flipcharts, sticky notes, and other materials while the team is working independently on a separate activity. If I identify issues in the meeting, I will ask the team to clarify and correct it. Of course, when I transcribe the paper materials to an electronic format, I perform a second and more thorough quality check. I will follow up via e-mail or phone with whomever can help me resolve the issue.

One last point: be sure to leave the meeting with a list of action items. This list helps drive forward momentum into the next project meeting.

11. Evaluate Facilitator Effectiveness:

The project is nearing its end and the team has achieved most if not all of the project goals. The project deliverables have been written, vetted, and communicated. However, before the team leaves the project, I ask for their feedback about my skills as a facilitator. This feedback is critical to my self-improvement. I also share this feedback with my manager and the project sponsor.

An anonymous survey sent to team members is an excellent way to get this feedback, typically part of post-project review process. I incorporate several questions about my facilitation into the survey. This slide shows representative questions. I write a quantitative question and follow it with a qualitative question. In the first example on this slide, I ask survey respondents to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with this declarative statement. In the second question, I ask the respondent to explain their response to the first question and/or to provide supplemental feedback.

Thank you for your interest in this topic. This slide is the last in this module. Click the next button to leave this presentation.