

# What Am I Getting Into?



*What lies behind us is nothing compared to what lies within us and ahead of us.*

—Anonymous

*You don't invent your mission, you detect it.*

—Victor Frankl

**T**he facilitation process is rewarding and at the same time can be mentally and physically taxing. As a meeting facilitator, you serve the needs of your group members and work to help make them successful with their assigned tasks. In this introductory chapter, you learn about how facilitators serve teams, the characteristics of effective facilitators and teams, the purposes of meetings, and other foundational information about the facilitation process. In addition, you can assess your own strengths, match them to the skills required of facilitators, and plan for your professional growth in the area of facilitation. As you examine the contents of this chapter, use the following focusing questions to guide your learning:

- ◆ What is the role of a facilitator in working with a team?
- ◆ How is it different from leading a group?
- ◆ What are the advantages and disadvantages of facilitating from inside an organization?
- ◆ How is working from the inside different from working with a group as an external facilitator?

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- ◆ What advantages do teams have over individuals in the decision-making process?
- ◆ What kinds of group behaviors do you directly impact as a facilitator?
- ◆ What group behaviors do you have minimal control over?
- ◆ What skills do you possess that you can transfer into your role as a facilitator?
- ◆ In what areas are you seeking to grow as a facilitator?

### WHY DO WE GET PEOPLE TOGETHER TO MEET?

Organizations get people together for a variety of reasons. Historically, teams of people operated the first farms and businesses. Many of these teams consisted of extended family members, apprentices, or those who owed the owner some type of service. In today's work environment, teams are being used in a variety of operational and decision-making capacities. In their book *Why Teams Don't Work* (1995), Robbins and Finley list several of the advantages that teams have over individuals in operational and decision-making capacities. They include the following:

- ◆ Teams can improve the operating efficiency of the organization because team members are usually closer to the ultimate client than are the managers of the organization.
- ◆ Teams can improve communication because they are usually comprised of stakeholders in the enterprise.
- ◆ Teams have a broad understanding of the multiple issues that are needed to complete a task because their members are usually charged with completing these tasks.
- ◆ Teams can be creative because they are comprised of people representing a variety of perspectives on an issue.
- ◆ Teams understand all sides of the process needed to resolve an issue because their members usually represent constituents from these sides.

In thinking about facilitating teams, it is important to keep the information provided by Robbins and Finley in mind to make sure that we work to maximize the advantages that teams bring to the decision-making experience. The facilitator strategies discussed in other chapters of this book are designed to work with the natural advantages that teams bring to the process rather than in opposition to these strengths.

## WHEN DO WE USE TEAMS?

The judicious leader combines the advantages of teams with the situations that most benefit from their utilization. While this decision is individual and contextual in nature, there are some generic considerations to look for when making a decision to put a team to work on an issue. Here are several for you to consider:

- ◆ When the decision or task would benefit from the broad perspective that a group could bring to the process
- ◆ If a variety of stakeholders will be directly impacted by the ultimate decision
- ◆ In situations where a stakeholder or stakeholder group threatens to sabotage a decision made, no matter what the outcome
- ◆ When the leader has a bias or predisposition toward a potential solution to a problem facing the organization
- ◆ When the leader is having trouble generating a variety of palatable solutions
- ◆ When the leader wants the impact of the solution to be shared among several stakeholder groups
- ◆ In situations where a decision will be accepted more readily by a group, since one of its members was involved in the decision
- ◆ If a decision needs to be carefully considered before settling on a solution

In all these scenarios, the broad-based power of the team is used to help make a better decision or process. Facilitators can use these considerations to their advantage when working with group members to help them work together in a productive manner. Consider the strategy employed by a facilitator (Jane) in working with a group to make a decision regarding an employee recognition program. In starting the meeting, she tells the team members why they have been asked to participate in the decision about employee recognition:

You are here because you represent the major groups that will be directly impacted by this decision. Each of you brings a slightly different lens to this committee, but we need to find a way to combine these views in a manner that will best serve the needs of all employees.

Facilitators usually are overt and open about the processes that they are employing to work with their group. In this case, Jane let the group

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members understand why they were chosen and gave them permission to look at the issues from their own perspective, but she also set up the expectation that in the end, the group would be making a decision that serves the collective employees of the organization. In this example, Jane utilized a technique called framing, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

It is important to understand what kinds of decisions are best for teams to make and not to make. These kinds of decisions are situational and contextual, but the following generic ideas provide some guidance in the types of decisions to avoid having teams make:

- ◆ A decision that has already been made but needs a stamp of approval from a group
- ◆ Decisions where no real options or choices exist
- ◆ Situations where the power players want to influence a group to their way of thinking
- ◆ Difficult decisions requiring very complex problem-solving skills not yet introduced to team members
- ◆ Situations where the leaders of the organization or other entity will engage a group in a decision, and once the decision is made, change the decision, blaming the group for making the wrong decision on the issue
- ◆ Cases where no budget exists to implement the recommendations of the team
- ◆ Decisions where the group making them will be totally immune from the impact of the final outcome of the decision

All of these scenarios have a similar potential negative impact on the team making them. Asking a team to engage in a decision that is illustrated by one of the scenarios above could be perceived as condescending by that team. These kinds of tasks also waste the time of the team members. In cases such as the ones presented above, it is better to find some other mechanism or process to assist in the decision making rather than burden team members with the responsibility. Most stakeholder groups would rather hear that a decision on a topic was made without their involvement up front rather than finding out this same fact after the members have worked extensively on a committee charged with making a decision or that no real possibility existed for their decision to be implemented after they made it. Consider the following example in relation to this principle:

I was recently asked to facilitate a group of parents in a school district who were interested in adding a new kindergarten program for the upcoming year, but the school district had no money to

implement this program. Two school board members thought that we should form a task force to brainstorm ideas for these new kindergarten options. I carefully explained the potential problems in setting these people up to think that they were going to be making a decision that could be implemented when there was no way for that to happen. These board members couldn't see the dangers of this practice. Finally, after several months of talking through the issue, the board members dropped it. We told the parents that we could not even consider the new programming ideas until our budget situation improved.

On the surface, it may seem like the actions in this example shut down out-of-the-box and innovative thinking in the school district. That was not the intent of keeping the group members from meeting. Their work was put on hold until they could make a decision that had the possibility of being implemented. This school district had been notorious for asking groups and task forces to meet to generate ideas, only to have the final recommendations shot down at the last minute because the funding needed to implement the ideas was not available. This practice had caused much discontent among stakeholders in the district and made it extremely difficult to find people willing to serve on decision-making teams.

As a facilitator, you will need to know and understand the conditions surrounding the decision you are being asked to help facilitate the group through. It will be important for your success and the success of the group that it has some potential for success. If not, you will have to work to change the parameters under which the group will be working or recommend that the decision needs to be made using some other method.

## **THE IMPACT OF A FACILITATOR ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A GROUP**

Facilitators can have a positive impact on how well a group completes its assigned tasks. Let's look at a few examples where either the presence or absence of a facilitator impacted the effectiveness of a group working on a task.

1. At a recent meeting of a school district's administrative staff, the assistant superintendent of schools asked members of the administrative team to start the meeting by sharing a current positive initiative that was being implemented at their building or in their department. There was a short period of silence and then one principal shared a success story. The assistant superintendent

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listened to the story and then began to brag about how well this school was doing in its school improvement efforts. She said that the others in the room could learn from the example set by this school. She then asked for more initiatives, but no other site was willing to share an example.

2. A PTA budget committee was meeting to discuss its fundraising plan for the upcoming year. The facilitator of this committee asked the committee members to share their ideas for getting the membership of the PTA involved in the next fundraising drive. No ideas were shared immediately, so the person facilitating the meeting asked committee members to form groups of three and take 2 minutes to talk about potential ideas for this situation. At the end of the time, the facilitator asked the group members again to share ideas for the fundraising drive. This time, there were four possible strategies shared. The facilitator wrote them down on a piece of chart paper and broke the group into three large teams to talk about the merits and limitations of each strategy. At the end of the meeting, the group members had chosen one of the ideas for implementation. They had also worked out all the details regarding this idea, and it was ready to be presented to the PTA membership in the next newsletter. In past years, this committee had worked without a facilitator and had gotten into the habit of using an ineffective involvement strategy because the group was unable to generate any new, fresh ideas.

3. At an elementary school site-based management council meeting recently observed for another study, the group was engaged in a discussion involving setting the parent-teacher conference schedule. The principal of the school was leading the meeting. He asked for ideas in regard to setting the times for the conferences, and the music teacher shared a suggestion. The principal disagreed with his idea before he had finished his explanation. A classroom teacher then gave a different suggestion. The principal immediately agreed with this idea and called for a vote. Since the leader had supported this idea, a majority of the staff voted in favor of the idea. Several of the teachers on the site council were upset by this discussion and vote and were seen complaining in the parking lot outside the school about the decision and how the meeting had been run by the principal.

4. In preparing for a work team meeting, the person facilitating it was faced with a situation where one of the team members always tried to monopolize the discussion. Several of the other work team members had come to the person facilitating the meeting to share their displeasure with this person's behavior. The facilitator understood that this know-it-all at times had valuable information to share with the other members of the team but needed to find a way to channel his suggestions. She planned a strategy to begin to address the situation at the next meeting. In the meeting, she asked members to write down their ideas for their upcoming departmental goals. She then had them meet in small groups to discuss their ideas, and chose one member from each of the small groups to share their group's ideas. She purposely did not choose the know-it-all. The meeting went well as a result of her added structure. At the end of the meeting, she told the know-it-all that she understood that he had valuable information to share and was glad he allowed others to participate. Over the next few months, she worked with this person to help him find ways to positively contribute to ideas while letting others have a chance to participate as well.

In all these scenarios, the person leading the meetings was engaged in behaviors that caused certain things to occur on the team. The meetings that were conducted by facilitators had different outcomes than the meetings run by others because of the ability of the facilitators to put their personal agendas on hold in order to implement strategies designed to help make the team successful in the tasks each was attempting. In the other meetings that were conducted by nonfacilitators, problems arose. Later in this chapter we examine the specific strengths that facilitators bring to a meeting to help make it positive and productive. Let's take a look at the unique position of a facilitator and how facilitators work to make teams successful.

## **THE UNIQUE POSITION OF A GROUP FACILITATOR**

In today's organizations, whether they be schools, service clubs, businesses, or other enterprises, many stakeholder groups are involved in helping to make decisions. In some schools, site councils assist principals in providing a broad-based perspective in light of important school decisions; in other school districts, decisions regarding specific curricular programs are being made by community-based teams. In many service

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clubs, their work is organized by decision-making teams. In still other settings, teams are engaged in designing and implementing effective organizational improvement processes.

These teams and others don't operate effectively on their own; they usually require the assistance of a skilled facilitator to help them work in an efficient and effective manner. Keeping this in mind, the facilitator serves a group in ways that are different from that of a typical team member. Here are some of the ways in which facilitators serve decision-making groups:

- ◆ Manage group processes
- ◆ Provide the direction or goal for the group
- ◆ Track conversations; bring the group back into focus when the conversation strays too far off topic
- ◆ Manage energy; keep it at an optimal level for effective group operation
- ◆ Provide a safe but stimulating meeting climate
- ◆ Keep the process moving along in a productive manner
- ◆ Frame and set the parameters for decisions, how group members interact, and the depth of problem analysis used in the meeting
- ◆ Act as a group coach; set the conditions for the group to see the problem, design its own solutions, and implement the plan it has designed; keep the group positive and on track
- ◆ Provide information needed by the group to complete its assignment
- ◆ Take in group energy and emotions and rechannel these to help the group stay productive
- ◆ Provide a global view of the group and its processes
- ◆ Serve the group in whatever ways are needed to help it be successful in its assignment

These service roles obviously transfer to skill sets that facilitators need in order to do a good job in working with a team. The topic of facilitator skills is explored later in this chapter.

Even though facilitation and leading are sometimes lumped together as the same process, they do have some distinct differences. Facilitators can serve a group in a way that is much different from that of a leader. Michael Doyle and David Straus, in their book *How to Make Meetings Work* (1982/1993), talk about why managers shouldn't run their own meetings and why facilitators should be enlisted to conduct fair and objective meetings. Their information has been adapted for Table 1.1 to illustrate the difference between meeting leaders and meeting facilitators. Let's examine leading and facilitating to look for similarities and differences in these two processes.



**Table 1.1**

<i>Meeting Leaders</i>	<i>Meeting Facilitators</i>
The leader of the meeting usually has a higher level of authority in the organization than the people being led.	The facilitator of a group may have a higher level of authority in the organization than those being led, but the positional power of this person is not used in the process.
The leader of the meeting is charged with getting the group to a certain decision or outcome.	The facilitator of the meeting has a role to serve the group being facilitated.
Meeting leaders have an interest or stake in the outcome of the decision or task the group is engaged in completing.	Meeting facilitators usually aren't interested in the specifics of the decision or task the group is engaged in completing, but rather in the integrity of the process used to reach the goal or decision.
Meeting leaders do most of the talking in a meeting.	Facilitators let the participants do most of the talking in a meeting.
The team serves the needs of the leader.	The facilitator serves the needs of the team.
The meeting leader controls most aspects of the meeting.	A meeting facilitator sets up the conditions for success, asks the group to modify these conditions if necessary.
Meeting leaders cause members to say what they think the leader wants to hear; this is the result of the hierarchy that exists on the team.	Facilitators work to draw out the true feelings of participants on pertinent issues; this is the result of the safe and open atmosphere developed by the facilitator.
Meeting leaders are more concerned about efficiency and less concerned about process.	Meeting facilitators are less concerned about efficiency and more concerned about process.

Doyle and Straus (1982/1993) talk about the dangers to teams when the manager or leader attempts to run the meetings. They say that there are just too many variables for the leader to keep track of in order to make the meeting a success. An example that they share in the book helps to make their point.

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Picture yourself, for a moment, as president of the United States on the way to the airport in your limousine with your top advisers, having a last minute meeting with them. You wouldn't want to be driving the limousine at the same time, would you? Having to deal with the traffic would be a distraction, a waste of your time. In a similar way, you are too important to your group or organization to run your own meetings. Steering a meeting, like steering a car, demands total concentration. (1982, p. 34)

For most people, a day doesn't go by when they have not been involved in some sort of meeting. The types of meetings that we participate in daily can vary from a morning family discussion designed to coordinate the schedules of family members to a corporate planning session to put together the strategic plan for the upcoming fiscal year. In all these situations, communication difficulties and personal needs can get in the way of effective team operation. Facilitators serve an important role because they act as a person in the middle or a mediator to help bring out the natural effectiveness that lies within team members. Teams that have facilitators to help them through communication and decision-making processes usually find that the meeting is more efficient and the results are better than teams that are self-led. Facilitators can be members of the team or organization or come from outside a team or organization. Let's look at the topic of internal versus external facilitators.

### INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL FACILITATORS

The distinction between internal and external facilitators is obvious: internal facilitators come from within the organization or division, and external facilitators come from outside the group or division. Internal and external facilitators have distinct advantages and disadvantages in working with a group. You may be asked to serve a group in either or both capacities, so it is valuable to explore the advantages and disadvantages of each type of facilitator here. As you review the list in Table 1.2, pay particular attention to how you could maximize the strengths and overcome the limitations in each role.

The information presented here is designed to let you know about some of the more common problems associated with both internal and external facilitators. Use it to raise your awareness of blind spots so you can serve your groups in the most effective manner possible. Even though in some cases one type of facilitator may be better than another, in reality, both kinds of facilitators can be effective if the strengths and limitations are carefully considered. Whether you are acting as an internal or external

**Table 1.2**

<i>Internal Facilitators</i>	<i>External Facilitators</i>
<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Advantages</b>
Have intimate knowledge of the group and group members; can use this information to build on group strengths and work around weaknesses.	Have limited knowledge about group or group members; can come to session with no preconceived notions.
Understand the organizational culture; can use this information to establish meeting parameters.	Lack knowledge about organizational cultural limitations or weaknesses; able to approach experience without putting up roadblocks.
Are able to get a clear vision for the desired finished product through formal and informal information channels.	Have to rely on formal information channels to find out the vision for the final finished product; are able to avoid being tainted by mixed messages.
Have knowledge of past efforts in this area; can use this knowledge to avoid problems encountered in the past.	No information about past efforts or initiatives to limit the thinking of the facilitator in designing or helping a group design a solution to their assigned task.
Are able to connect with participants between sessions; can clarify issues and make modifications as needed	Can't easily connect with participants between sessions; can avoid being influenced.
<b>Limitations</b>	<b>Limitations</b>
Having firsthand knowledge of the group may limit the facilitator in thinking about the capacity of the group to solve problems; the facilitator may provide more assistance than is necessary to the group.	A lack of understanding of group member strengths, limitations, and previous problems may contribute to the facilitator using the wrong strategies to help them work together.
They have knowledge about the organizational culture that may cause them to work under assumptions that will limit their ability to help the group to grow.	A lack of knowledge of the organizational culture may cause the facilitator to let the group engage in previously inappropriate behaviors.
Being from inside the organization may give the facilitator too much information about conflicting visions for the final product; this may cause confusion.	Dependent on the person who contracted for the facilitation for the final product vision; this vision may be partial or inaccurate.
The group may have too much background information about the facilitator and not accept this person as their facilitator.	The group may not have a good understanding of the background and experiences of the facilitator to establish credibility.

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facilitator, keep these strengths and limitations in mind as you prepare to work with your groups.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE FACILITATORS

Since their backgrounds, situations, and the difficulty of their assignments vary, facilitators possess varied skill sets. However, there are several core competencies, or foundational skills, that must be in place for individuals to be able to facilitate groups effectively:

- ◆ The ability to put their own needs on hold to make the group successful
- ◆ The ability to look at the big picture in relation to the work the team is engaged in performing
- ◆ A solid understanding of their own strengths and limitations
- ◆ Strong interpersonal skills; the ability to build rapport with people quickly
- ◆ An understanding of the task the group is to complete; the ability to break it into parts
- ◆ Skill in using observation to diagnose how the team is working together; the ability to use this diagnosis to make adjustments and implement strategies to improve their working relationships
- ◆ The ability to temporarily suspend their opinion in order to listen to an idea or suggestion
- ◆ An understanding of the optimal energy level needed by a group to function well; strategies to raise or lower the group's energy level as needed
- ◆ The ability to observe, interpret, and act on group body language and nonverbal cues
- ◆ An awareness of all the energy sources, distractions, and happenings around them; the ability to act on these for the good of the group
- ◆ A genuine interest in helping people do their best on a task
- ◆ Skill in depersonalizing anger, negative comments, and other actions that may occur as the facilitator is working a group through the stages of becoming a well-functioning team
- ◆ The ability to know when to press the group toward task completion and when to allow it to diverge or change directions
- ◆ The ability to display honesty and integrity, building a sense of trust with a group
- ◆ The ability to adapt to group needs or changing situations

- ◆ An understanding of the need for emotional self-control when working with a group
- ◆ The ability to stay calm under pressure

Facilitators develop these and other skills through varied experiences over time. If you sincerely care about the success of the group and are able to communicate that caring to the group, you can be successful. While having a well-developed set of strategies can go a long way to making you feel competent, facilitation is a highly emotional activity. The best facilitators are in tune with their intuition and use this sense as their guide during their facilitation experiences. Your own personal intuition is something that you will have to build as you work with groups as their facilitator. Once you have this in place, the facilitator skills you want to apply to your work will naturally fall into place.

To help you take a self-inventory of your personal strengths in relation to those needed in the facilitation process, please complete this inventory. Use the results to understand what you bring to the facilitation experience and to set personal objectives for your own growth.

### **Taking Stock of Your Strengths**

Use the template in Table 1.3 to list the personal strengths that you possess that can help you be an effective facilitator. In answering the questions, be as specific as possible. Remind yourself of these strengths when preparing to work with a group. Use your strengths to help you reach the growth objectives you have set for yourself in relation to the skills of facilitation.

### **YOUR MISSION AS A FACILITATOR**

The role of a facilitator is one that incorporates service and task accomplishment with a greater goal—that of helping people. Many facilitators describe their work using strong emotional language because what they do can have life-changing results on their clients, both internal and external. Rather than facilitation being just a job, it is a way of life where you live the values of service and helping people to grow. In this spirit, many facilitators find it helpful to define their personal mission and design a mission statement for their work. Use the following template to help you with this task.

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**Table 1.3** Personal Strengths Template

How do I build rapport with others? What do I do to welcome people and help them to feel comfortable when I meet with them? What kinds of feedback have I received about my ability to connect with others?

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What strategies do I use to make changes to my plan when a shift is necessary? How do I decide when my needs should be put on hold in favor of the needs of the group? What strategies do I use to design alternative plans when a change in plans is needed? What do I do now to maintain my flexibility when working with others?

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How do I temporarily withhold my opinion in order to serve the needs of others? What strategies do I use to make sure others know that I understand their perspective on an issue? How do I balance understanding a group or an individual's perspective while getting my point across in a positive manner?

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How do I communicate my interest in helping people to be successful? How do I demonstrate my honesty and integrity in my working relationships? How do I build a sense of trust with others?

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What skills do I employ to stay calm in uncomfortable situations? How do I mediate negative situations so the negative emotions are minimized while the parties begin to work out their differences? What skills do I use to help myself get past the negative or insulting comments directed at me by others?

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How do I work through distractions toward preestablished goals? What do I use to recognize when a group is getting off task? How do I get them back on task in a positive manner?

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What kinds of strategies do I use to assess my strengths and limitations? How do I work to impact my personal and professional growth? How do I evaluate my growth efforts?

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What are my general thoughts about my skills as a facilitator?

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**Table 1.4** Personal Mission Template

What are the kinds of roles and experiences that give my life meaning?

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What drew me to facilitate and serve groups?

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What lasting impacts do I want to leave with the groups I facilitate?

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How will my interests, strengths, and passions make these impacts come true?

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### Personal Mission Template

Take some time to reflect on your motivation for facilitation and the impact you want your efforts to have on the groups that you serve. After you complete the responses to the prompts, design a facilitator mission statement (Table 1.4) that you can share with the groups you work with in the future.

Design a personal mission statement that incorporates your reflections from above and reflects the following:

- ◆ Clarifies what is important to you in working with others
- ◆ Provides a mental picture of what you are about
- ◆ Communicates the emotional component of your focus on facilitation

### Personal and Professional Growth-Planning Template

Use the planning template in Table 1.5 to help you as you set personal and professional goals for your role as a facilitator. Complete your plan using the grid in Table 1.6.

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**Table 1.5** Personal and Professional Growth-Planning Template

<p>List your strengths and the gifts you bring to the facilitation process.</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>What are the strengths that you see as essential to be an effective facilitator?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>What is the gap between your present skills and the skills you see as essential to effective facilitation?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>Write down your general goals for your growth as a facilitator.</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

**Table 1.6**

<i>Goal Activity</i>	<i>Specific Skill</i>	<i>Method to Attain Skill</i>	<i>Timeline</i>	<i>Data to Verify Skill Attainment</i>

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## SUMMARY

In this beginning chapter, we have examined the background of facilitation, the roles and strengths of facilitators, and I have provided opportunities for you to think about how you fit into the role of a facilitator. The core of facilitation revolves around the ability of those interested in serving groups in this manner to connect emotionally with the groups and help their members channel their strengths and talents to accomplish their assigned tasks. This chapter is titled “What Am I Getting Into?” because it is crucial that those engaging in the practice of facilitation know and understand its components, its advantages, and its requirements. Once these elements are clear, a person can clearly serve the needs of the groups that need the services a facilitator can offer. In Chapter 2, “Get Ready, Get Set . . .,” we examine strategies that make or break facilitators and the planning they engage in when getting ready to work with a group. Enjoy your journey as a facilitator—it is demanding as well as rewarding.