Introduction

*There is always tremendous potential
for people to work together well.
All we need is a process
that is both participatory and effective.*

Making decisions together is a vital part of almost any group. We may come together to form a family, to connect recreationally, to operate a business or nonprofit organization or to collaborate in some form of community project or governance. Whatever the reason for gathering, a group must somehow make decisions. These decisions determine how it will accomplish its goals. So the effectiveness of any group rests upon its ability to make decisions well.

Too often, however, a poor decision-making process spoils a group's effectiveness. Unconscious patterns of exclusion, domination, apathy, manipulation, passive coercion or other problematic behaviors often emerge. The decisions the group makes suffer, as does the group's enjoyment of the process.

Fortunately, the art of guiding groups through decision-making has made great progress over the past several decades. There are now ways to make decisions in groups that are both efficient and enjoyable for all participants. The Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making model (CODM) incorporates these advances into a simple, stepwise model. Work groups, organizations, social groups and even families can employ this model and reap the rewards that effective group cooperation can bring.

CODM combines the two goals of maximum participation and maximum efficiency. Group members can use this process to come up with better solutions than any individual group member could have formulated. And they can do it in a way that respects and includes everyone in the group. Increased collaboration gives participants an increased sense of ownership and a stronger commitment to effective implementation. Group members both feel good that their needs were included in the decision, and they feel a stronger investment in helping ensure the success of the decision. At the same time, however, CODM recognizes that groups need to be able to produce decisions efficiently, so as not to burden the members with long meetings or stagnant progress on popular ideas.

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CODM was developed through years of personal and professional experience facilitating groups. It is based on the most successful principles and practices from the field of professional group facilitation. In addition, it draws powerful contributions from the fields of mediation and interpersonal communication. Combining the best thinking from these three different fields means CODM can help a group make better decisions in a way that simultaneously helps the group itself grow closer, stronger and more cohesive.

The CODM process can be used to generate widespread agreement in any group. Whether decisions are finalized by unanimous consent, by a vote or by the ruling of a person-in-charge, CODM can assist the process and improve the result. This flexibility makes CODM applicable in both hierarchical and egalitarian organizations. Whenever widespread agreement is the goal, CODM can be used to reach for it.

Using This Book

This book is designed to help you facilitate whatever group you belong to. If you are not a facilitator, this book can help you understand group decision-making, so that you can become a more skillful group member. The CODM process is designed to be accessible to everyone. It offers valuable tools both for professional facilitators and for people who have never facilitated a group before. By carefully describing the steps and the tasks of the facili-

tator at each stage of the process, this book makes the complicated art of group facilitation easier to understand.

The organization of the book is fairly straightforward. The first two chapters address the basic principles of consensus-oriented decision-making and the role of the facilitator. Chapter 3 covers the importance of clearly choosing a decision rule. The fourth chapter provides an overview of the steps. And the following chapters describe the facilitator's primary tasks during each of the steps. After this, there is a chapter that takes an in-depth look at the dynamics of groups that require unanimous agreement. Finally, the book concludes with some helpful resources for further study.

Throughout the book, the text is augmented with textboxes and sidebars to enrich your learning about group facilitation. There are several different categories of information provided, including:

- **Key Concepts:** Ideas worth highlighting for special attention
- **Communication Skill Builders:** Communication tools valuable to facilitators and/or group members
- **Facilitator Language Guides:** Examples of specific phrasing facilitators can use as a model
- **Facilitator Tasks:** The main tasks for the facilitator in each of the seven steps
- **Options to Consider:** Alternative structures available for use in special circumstances
- **Shortcuts:** Alternatives to speed up the process if there are pressing time constraints
- **Group Dynamics in Action:** Relevant vignettes of group dynamics[1]

In addition to facilitating a decision-making process, group facilitators may be responsible for guiding groups in other kinds of activities. Team-building, information sharing and personal growth are some common examples. This book focuses primarily on leading groups through a decision-making process. The field of group facilitation, however, is broader than this. If you are interested in facilitating groups in other types of activities, some of the material on websites noted in the resource list may be useful.

While the steps in this model offer good guidance, don't let them stop you from being creative. Groups can modify the process, for instance, depending on the amount of time they want to give to a particular decision. CODM's principles can be applied even in the absence of a formal decision-making process. Customize the model as you use it. Apply these principles to make your group's decision-making process both participatory and efficient in whatever way works for your particular group.

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The Principles of Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making (CODM)

Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making (CODM) is a powerful group decision-making process. It can be applied to virtually any type of decision in almost any type of group. Whatever the content of the decision a group is addressing, CODM can be used as the process for making that decision. The process is built upon several key principles of effective group decision-making. These principles ensure that a group's decisions are made in a way that is both participatory and efficient.

The acronym CODM is pronounced *co-dem*. While the abbreviation stands for Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making, the pronunciation calls to mind the prefix *co-* as in *cooperative*, and *dem*, the root of the word *democracy*, meaning rule by the people. Appropriately, the CODM process facilitates cooperation toward decision-making that includes everyone.

Key Concept

Consensus and Unanimity

Understanding CODM begins with understanding the term *consensus*. Often people use the terms *unanimity* and *consensus* synonymously. Greater clarity is achieved, however, when the different meanings of these words are parsed. Consensus is defined by *Webster's* dictionary as "agreement of the majority in sentiment or belief" and by the *Oxford* dictionary as "general agreement." For group facilitators, consensus is most useful as a term describing the process of making decisions collaboratively. Thus, a consensus-oriented process is one in which people work together to reach as much agreement as possible. Unanimity (or unanimous consent) is more specific. It refers to the outcome of a vote showing all members are agreed. Consensus is the process. Unanimity is one possible result of a consensus process.

A consensus-oriented process can be used in conjunction with any type of final decision rule.

Once a consensus process has been used to develop a proposal, the group must have a way to finalize a decision. The criterion a group uses for this is called a *decision rule*. Some groups use unanimity as their decision rule. No decision is final unless everyone agrees. Most groups, however, use other decision rule options. They may finalize decisions by voting (majority or supermajority) or by the verdict of a person-in-charge or governing committee.

A consensus-oriented process can be used in conjunction with any type of final decision rule. For instance, a business owner might use the CODM steps to guide her employees in developing a plan for reducing unnecessary paperwork in the office. All the employees may participate and collaboratively form a new plan, knowing that the owner will ultimately decide whether to adopt the plan. Alternatively, a team of softball players might use a consensus process to reach as much agreement as possible on a set of guidelines for adding players to the team. If they do not all agree, however, the team tradition may dictate that a majority vote is enough to make a decision on the most popular proposal they have been discussing.

The confusion of the terms *unanimity* and *consensus* have led many people to some false assumptions. Some have resisted the idea of using a consensus process because they thought it would mean the group could not make a decision without unanimous consent. Others have thought that

requiring unanimity is a necessary component of any consensus process. Once the terms are better understood, it becomes more clear that groups can choose to use a consensus process whether or not they use unanimity as a final decision rule. There will be more discussion of decision rules in Chapter 3, and more discussion of the dynamics of requiring unanimity in Chapter 12.

Participatory Decision-Making

CODM encourages maximum participation by all of the group members that will be affected by a decision. This fully participatory process has several aspects, each contributing to the quality of both the decisions made and the experience of the participants.

Inclusion

Including everyone who will be affected by a decision is helpful in multiple ways. First, it ensures that all the impacts of the decision will be well considered. Each point of view on the matter gets a voice in the deliberation. Thus, unforeseen problems are less likely to emerge in the implementation of the decision. This benefit is sorely missing when decisions are made by either a single leader (or subgroup), who may be unaware of some of the potential impacts of the decision.

Second, including the whole group in a decision-making process builds a sense of unity and cohesion in the group. Everyone's input is acknowledged as important, which helps all participants feel valued. Additionally, whole group discussions ensure that all members of the group are in communication with each other. When an organization has separate departments, physically isolated members, factions or emotionally estranged members, a group meeting may be the only direct contact some group members have with one another.

If an organization is large, including all members may not be feasible. In this case, care should be taken to select the people who will be included in decision-making meetings. It is wise to include at least one representative of any significant subset within the organization. If the decision process

involves multiple meetings, then there should be a way for the representatives to communicate with members of their subset between meetings.

Additionally, decision groups can include *thought leaders* on specific topics. A thought leader is someone who may not have an official role, but whose expertise on or attention to a particular topic is well known. Including thought leaders helps make sure that all discussion of the topic is brought to the decision-making meetings. This is much preferable to situations where the official discussion of a topic competes with unofficial meetings of people excluded from the official process.

When a group's decisions affect people outside the group, the principle of inclusiveness can also be important. For instance, a group that provides a service to the community might want to include input from the community members being served. Identifying all the stakeholders and determining what degree of inclusiveness to offer them in decision-making are key considerations in many situations.

Open-Mindedness

For a group to work together effectively, the members must value being open-minded. Though we often are very convinced of our own opinions, the successful cooperation of a group is only possible if we are willing to consider each other's ideas as well. When all parties agree to give everyone's ideas a fair hearing and sincere consideration, the potential for conflict and entrenched argument is dramatically reduced.

Open-mindedness can be enhanced by a structure that ensures that each person's ideas will receive attention in fair turn. Taking turns considering one idea at a time creates the safety and focused attention required to discern the merits of any particular idea. This benefit is lost when group discussions devolve into a chaotic and competitive struggle that pits ideas against each other before they are fully articulated or well understood.

When open-mindedness is particularly hard to elicit, some group development training may be helpful. Team-building exercises or more comprehensive relationship improvement retreats can address the background tension that sometimes stifles open-minded discussion. Facilitation of this type of group activity is outside the scope of this book. But it is worth noting

Taking turns considering one idea at a time creates the safety and focused attention required to discern the merits of any particular idea.

that groups willing to devote time and resources to team-building are likely to experience greater openness in decision-making.

Empathy

Empathy is a vital part of any functional group process. For people to work well together, they must be able to understand each other. And if they can understand not only the words and ideas expressed, but also the underlying feelings and needs, then a real sense of connection can develop. While connection may not be an overt goal of a particular group, the fact remains that people cooperate better and feel more motivated to contribute when they feel more connected to the group. An empathetic process is one where group members take time to clearly express their understanding of each other. It not only helps avoid the miscommunication of ideas; it strengthens the relationships between group members.

Collaboration

Collaborative group discussions are often the best way to devise solutions to complex problems. Each person has both a unique perspective and a unique genius to bring to problem solving. When they work together poorly, too many cooks can spoil the broth. But when members successfully collaborate, the group can come up with creative solutions that no single person was capable of concocting.

The process of collaboration requires that participants release any entrenched positions they may have held prior to the meeting. They are directed by the facilitator to identify all the underlying needs and concerns of each party affected by the decision. The resulting solution is therefore the group's best attempt to meet as many needs as possible. This is in contrast to non-collaborative decision-making, where one solution that meets certain needs is pitted against another solution that meets competing needs.

Shared Ownership

Participatory decision-making fosters a sense of shared ownership of the resulting decisions. When group members are included; when they are heard with an open mind; when both their thoughts and their feelings are clearly

understood and when their ideas are woven into a collaborative solution they are likely to feel a shared responsibility for the decisions reached. This shared ownership of the decision often results in a heightened commitment by all group members to ensure successful implementation of the decision. Apathy, passive-aggressive behavior and other forms of undermining become far less likely. Instead, a shared internal motivation to succeed becomes the dominant dynamic.

Marcel lived in a large household of grad students near the University of California in Santa Cruz. The group of renters shared a large yard that, according to the lease, was the responsibility of the tenants to maintain. Marcel considered this duty to be sadly neglected, and he decided to take some leadership to solve the problem. He crafted a list of landscaping tasks and constructed a chore wheel to distribute responsibility for these tasks equally to all household members. He posted the chore wheel where everyone could see it, along with a note on the wall asking for everyone's cooperation.

Unfortunately, after several weeks it became apparent that few people were actually doing any yard work. Marcel could not understand why. His system was intended to be fair and reasonable. When he pressed people to do their share, some housemates actually got angry with him. "You're not the landlord," Juno said.

Marcel was angry too. He considered moving out of the household. But a friend convinced him to call for a house meeting and try to use a participatory decision-making process. In the meeting, Marcel apologized for trying to solve the problem himself and asked the group to come up with a solution. The resulting inclusive discussion identified that some household members felt their extra contributions in the kitchen should offset their yard work responsibilities. Others were willing to mow the lawn, but had no idea how to prune trees or differentiate weeds from perennial herbs. They listened to each other and began to generate a way to adapt the concept of a chore wheel until everyone felt a genuine willingness to make help make the system work.

FIGURE 1.1. Summary of Participatory Decision-Making Principles[1]

Principle	Participatory Decision-Making	Non-Participatory Decision-Making
Inclusion	All group members and as many stakeholders as possible are present. Each person has a chance to speak and be heard. The needs of stakeholders not present are considered.	Key people affected by a decision are not present for the discussion. Some voices dominate, while others are silent. Those not attending are not represented.
Open-Mindedness	Participants are encouraged to be open-minded. Everyone is asked to consider all perspectives. Unique points of view are valued.	Participants represent fixed positions and argue the merits of their own point of view. Only popular ideas are worth discussing.
Empathy	Effort is made to provide participants the experience of being understood. This applies both to their ideas and feelings.	The discussion focuses on the ideas being debated, without concern for offering empathy to the participants.
Collaboration	Proposals are built with everyone contributing, and designed to meet as many stakeholder needs as possible. All concerns are considered important.	Proposals generated by individuals or sub-groups compete to win sufficient approval to become adopted by the group. Each proposal mainly addresses the concerns of its advocates.
Shared Ownership	All participants, having jointly developed a proposal, share a common motivation to make implementation of the resulting decision succeed. The group leadership participates in the discussion.	The group leadership makes decisions without participating in the discussion. Advocates of a proposal are motivated during implementation. But others may be apathetic or possibly undermine successful implementation.

Efficient Decision-Making

Another fundamental value of the CODM process is that group decision-making must be efficient as well as participatory. Without an effective process, a group trying for greater participation is likely to suffer a serious loss of efficiency. Eventually, groups that cannot make decisions effectively are likely to frustrate members so much that participation declines or the group fails at its mission. Members begin to dread or avoid meetings or show up in body only. Groups cannot maintain high levels of participation without operating efficiently.

Greater participation does take time. If all participants have a voice, each voice deserves to be heard and understood. The time invested in respectful listening, however, does not indicate a loss of efficiency. It can improve collaboration and strengthen group cohesion in valuable ways. Time spent improving the group atmosphere is not wasted. In fact, this time may be "harvested on the back end." Finalizing and implementing decisions may go much more smoothly when a little time is invested in high-participation group discussions.

The final key to efficient decision-making is clarity about how a decision becomes finalized.

Efficiency is lost only when group participation is poorly managed. Bickering, polarizing, grandstanding, withholding and various other non-collaborative interactions are the real time wasters. Groups must be structured and facilitated well enough to avoid frustrating the members to the point where they no longer want to participate.

Fortunately, with effective structure, skillful facilitation and a clear decision rule, more participation does not have to mean less efficiency. Even very large meetings can reap the benefits of a participatory process while remaining efficient. The keys to an efficient process lie in the following principles.

Effective Meeting Structure

An effective meeting structure guides a group through decision-making with clear milestones and transition points. It coordinates the group members to focus together on each important stage of decision-making. It also prevents the chaos and dysfunctional dynamics that can wreak havoc when there is no structure to a discussion. Even naturally skilled facilitators can easily get overwhelmed trying to guide a group without a clearly structured process.

CODM is a stepwise structure for guiding a group through a decision-making discussion. It can help a group navigate through even the most challenging decisions. It is not, however, an overall structure for leading groups. Groups do many things other than make decisions. Those other functions may be well served by other structures, or perhaps by unstructured interactions. The CODM process is not intended to cover all aspects of group facilitation. Its use is specific to the task of facilitating group decision-making.

Skillful Facilitation

A skillful facilitator can successfully use an effective meeting structure to guide the group to a satisfying result. Without competent facilitation, a group may not be able to follow a structure, no matter how well that structure is designed. It is the combination of good structure and skillful facilitation that is essential. As we will see, skillful facilitation also includes preparing well for group discussions. The next chapter discusses the general qualities and responsibilities of a group facilitator.

Clear Decision Rule

The final key to efficient decision-making is clarity about how a decision becomes finalized. Different groups have different final decision rules. Sometimes the determining criterion is clear; sometimes it is murky. The options fall along a well-known spectrum. In hierarchically structured organizations, final decision-making authority rests with a particular person-in-charge. Sometimes the person is actually a small group or executive committee. In democratic organizations the authority is held by the group and exercised through either majority rule, supermajority or in some cases unanimity.

Figure 1.2. Summary of Efficient Decision-Making Principles

Principle	Efficient Decision-Making	Non-Efficient Decision-Making
Effective Meeting Structure	Group uses a stepwise model that keeps the discussion progressively on track toward a decision. Each popular alternative is given a turn for focused consideration.	Group has extended periods of confusion about the topic. Multiple issues compete for attention. Convergence of ideas is left up to chance.
Skillful Facilitation	The facilitator is prepared, skilled and empowered to shepherd the process, keeping the group inspired and on track toward a decision in a safe, supportive atmosphere.	The facilitator allows non-productive or non-collaborative behavior to predominate.
Clear Decision Rule	Group has an established default decision rule.	Group's decision rule is vague or the group must establish a new decision criterion for each decision.

The CODM process can be used with any of these final decision-making authority criteria. The benefits of efficiency and participation are useful in any case. The different options each carry their own pros and cons. These are outlined in Chapter 4. No decision-making process (including CODM) will be effective, however, when the group's final decision rule is not clearly understood by the participants.

Summary

Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making is a process any group can use to produce decisions made both efficiently and with a high degree of participation. This combination enables groups to reap the many benefits of working together, while ensuring that such collaboration is enjoyable rather than frustrating.

The CODM
Facilitator Role

*The great leaders are like the best conductors — they reach
beyond the notes to reach the magic in the players.*

Blaine Lee

If you are reading this book, it is probably because you want the groups you
know to function better. Group facilitation may be your profession, a part
of your job or a volunteer interest. If you are not a facilitator, you may just
want to understand more about how groups work. Whatever the context,
learning to facilitate empowers you to offer a valuable skill. By providing
this skill in the service of a group, you can be a vital catalyst. You can use
your role to create a chance for everyone in the group to contribute their
talents as well. And as you help your group collaborate in decision-making,
you are likely to be helping your fellow group members grow more con-
nected and helping your group become more cohesive.

   As you provide this valuable service, you may find that you may grow
as well. The role of facilitator can be very challenging. It demands that you
deal effectively with your own emotions so that you can stay available to the
group. It demands that you treat everyone with respect and compassion.
But it also demands that you deal effectively with people when their behav-
ior is not helpful to the group. Facilitators must sometimes be inspirational,

and sometimes very practical. You must be able to model all the qualities you want to foster in the groups you lead. The challenge can beckon you to keep growing as a person, so that you can function with ever increasing grace.

Developing facilitation skills takes time and experience. Inevitably, there will be times when you will flounder. You may feel lost, overwhelmed or frustrated. If your heart is in it, however, most groups will help you succeed. After all, your success as a facilitator will ultimately help the group. Mistakes are okay, as long as you keep paying attention and are willing to make adjustments. There will always be some trial and error in the learning process. With the following principles in mind, however, even a novice facilitator can get started in the right direction.

Group Leadership

Understanding the role of a group facilitator requires some discussion of group leadership in general. The facilitator has the official role of guiding a group through a meeting or decision-making process. The group, however, may have other official leadership positions as well. Depending on how it is organized, a group may have a president, chairperson, director(s), business owner, manager or other type of designated leader or leaders. Alternatively, some groups have no official leadership roles. Regardless of who occupies specific roles, however, group leadership is a vital function.

Egalitarian Leadership

Good leadership involves "thinking about the whole group." This function is not limited, however, to people holding an official leadership position. In fact, anyone in the group who is thinking about the whole group could be considered an unofficial leader. When a group member asks herself, "What is the group needing now?" she is practicing leadership. A designated facilitator may be expected to function this way. But groups work best when all the members realize they have the power to take this perspective as well.

Group cooperation can increase when participants are encouraged to adopt this more egalitarian definition of leadership. No one need feel ex-

cluded from the opportunity to assist the group. Just because a member does not have an official role does not mean they do not have good ideas that could help the group. Openly encouraging participants to think about the whole group benefits a facilitator in several ways:

- There is less resistance to the perceived power a facilitator may have.
- Group members are less passive.
- More intelligences are available whenever the group gets stuck.
- Participants demonstrate more concern for one another.

An important consideration in egalitarian leadership is how participants can work *with* rather than *against* the facilitator. If a participant engages in a power struggle to assert his ideas in competition with the facilitator, he is probably not thinking clearly about the needs of the whole group. It is more useful to offer ideas in ways that help the facilitator make good choices. Then the group does not get distracted from their work by the dynamics of a leadership challenge.

I was facilitating a meeting to address sexism on a college campus when I misheard a comment about date rape made by a female student. When I tried to reflect back her point of view, the group thought I was expressing my personal opinion. Several audience members registered distinct disagreement with that opinion. I did not understand, however, why they seemed to be challenging me personally. I could feel the tension in the room mount. Some were very uncomfortable with their facilitator being confronted. Others shared the demand for an explanation. I fumbled to defend myself, without realizing how I had been misunderstood. I got more and more inarticulate as it appeared that I was only putting my foot deeper into my mouth.

Fortunately, I caught the eye of a student near me. She flashed me her notebook page on which she had written in large letters "LET'S BREAK." I took her advice and called for a brief intermission. During the break I was able to identify the mistake and figure out how to proceed. The break was

just what both the group and I needed. Though the student had no official role, she was a leader of the group at a moment when I was lost and confused. She was the one who figured out what we all needed.

A designated facilitator can provide clarity in directing the process of the group more effectively than a chorus of unofficial group members. Knowing this, however, group members without an official role can still exercise leadership. They can think about how the facilitator can be supported to serve the group well. They can call attention to the needs of the group without blaming or criticizing either the facilitator or other members of the group. When facilitators can cultivate this type of leadership within the group, meetings can be very enjoyable.

Facilitative Leadership

Facilitative leadership is an emerging paradigm in organizational management.[1] A facilitative leader is someone who leads by fostering collaboration. This is in contrast to traditional hierarchical management paradigms and more directive styles. The CODM process is a valuable tool for facilitative leaders. It offers a way to help groups reach collaborative decisions with maximum participation, efficiency and shared ownership. A facilitative leader, however, extends the principles behind CODM to a broader range of

FIGURE 2.1. Comparing Leadership Styles

Situation	Facilitative Leadership Style	Directive Leadership Style
Complaints about stressful working conditions	Facilitate group discussion of the source of stress and possible solutions.	Shift individual responsibilities to reduce the stress on the people complaining. Or give pep talk on how to deal better with stress.
People not complying with existing policies	Facilitate group discussion on the root causes of non-compliance. Consider systemic changes.	Institute better oversight and enforce compliance.
Conflict between co-workers	Facilitate discussion of possible underlying dynamics and unmet needs within the organization.	Adjudicate and request that each party try better to cooperate with each other.

management duties. Rather than asking, "How do I set goals, delegate tasks and hold people accountable?" the facilitative leader asks, "How do I foster the group's ability to envision, collaborate and implement projects they can own themselves?"

Group Leaders and Group Facilitators

If a group has a designated leader, that person may be the one who facilitates meetings and group decision-making. Usually it is preferable, however, for someone else to act as facilitator. Separating these roles can be helpful for several reasons:

- The leader may not have strong facilitation skills.
- The leader may have difficulty staying neutral.
- The leader may have a more formal, less empathetic relationship to the others.
- The leader may be able to listen more carefully when she is not simultaneously facilitating.
- The issue may be so controversial that an outside facilitator is needed.
- The leader may be better able to provide important information to the group when she is not simultaneously facilitating.

Some leaders may be hesitant to yield the role of facilitator to someone else. If they can learn to trust a facilitator, however, they often enjoy being able to participate in discussions as a group member. The group may also enjoy the decreased power differential between the participants and the leader when they all have equal footing in a discussion. A more collegial feeling can develop during a meeting even if the final decision power still rests with the leader.

Facilitators from outside of the group can also be useful. Sometimes there is no group member that can be neutral enough on the content of an issue to serve well as a facilitator. Alternatively, available group members may not have sufficient skill to take on the role. An outside facilitator can provide valuable facilitation expertise and a clearly neutral approach. When successful, outside facilitators can help groups greatly increase their

efficiency in decision-making, saving valuable group time and organizational resources.

Dual Roles

When an outside facilitator is not used, the role is occupied by either a group leader or another group member. This means that the facilitator may sometimes have to step out of one role in order to speak to the group in the other role. In other words, the facilitator may choose to take off his facilitator hat and put on his group member hat in order to speak from an individual perspective. The group benefits when this role change is clearly articulated. And it is less confusing when hats are not changed too often. For this reason, the strength of each person's opinions about an issue should be a factor in the choice of who facilitates a decision. A person who feels less need to express personal opinions may be more effective as a facilitator.

General Qualities of Effective Facilitators

There are some general qualities that skillful facilitators must learn to embody. Rather than specific tasks, these qualities constitute an effective style of operating as a facilitator. The individual personalities of different facilitators may vary widely. But the qualities described here are essential to function well in the role.

Process Focused/Content Neutral

A group facilitator guides the decision-making process. It is important, however, for the facilitator to stay neutral on the content of a group's decisions. No one wants a facilitator who is biased toward a particular proposal. Any perceived bias may diminish participants' trust that the process being used is fair. Some group members may accommodate to the facilitator's perspective, and others may resist. A facilitator who stays neutral on the content of the discussion ensures that the group decision is truly representative of the group and not a result of biased leadership.

While facilitators are neutral on content, however, they can be very assertive about process. Their job is to continually shepherd the group

through the steps necessary to make a decision. The attention they place on the process helps ensure that these steps are traversed in a way that maintains a positive group experience.

It is vital to understand the difference between process and content. Figure 2.2 below can help make the distinction clear. The facilitator focuses on the group's process while the group focuses on the content of the discussion. The facilitator actively guides, suggests and asserts the direction of the decision-making process. If this guidance is resisted, the facilitator must listen and respond to feedback. Then, she can use the feedback to reestablish an acceptable process, one that allows the group to refocus on the content of the discussion.

FIGURE 2.2. Content vs. Process

Content	Process
What we are talking about	The way we talk about it
The problem we are trying to solve	The steps we take to find a solution
The proposal we develop	The way we develop the proposal
The final decision	The means of finalizing the decision

Staying focused on the group process is sometimes challenging. You may be so tempted to help your group achieve its goal that you forget that the journey is as important as the destination. The facilitator's job is to make sure the road to a decision does not damage the group. Even if the group does not reach its goals, the facilitator is successful whenever she has helped the process to remain respectful and collaborative.

Empowered

Facilitators hold a pivotal role in a group. They must use the authority of this role to ensure a successful group process. To be effective, they must make clear suggestions about how to proceed. A good facilitator allows the

group to stay focused on deciding the issue at hand (content of the decision). Meanwhile, the facilitator confidently guides the group on how the process will unfold.

Asserting yourself in a group can be scary. It is impossible to please everyone at all times. Sometimes you must take action, on behalf of the group, despite opposition from one or more participants. Group members who disagree may criticize you. With enough grace, non-defensiveness and communication skill, you can usually regain the cooperation of resistant participants. But there will be times when you must rely primarily on your own confidence to carry you, until you reestablish the whole group's cooperation.

A facilitator who is hesitant to act may leave the group wallowing, without clear direction. The vacuum of leadership may attract attempts for dominance of the group from members who may have assertive personalities or who hold leadership positions, but are not skilled in facilitation. If a participant appears to have taken control of the process from the facilitator, other participants may try to compete for control as well. The group's atmosphere and progress toward a decision will then be hampered by the ensuing power struggle.

Thus, it is important to act when the group needs facilitation. The dilemma is that sometimes the group will need facilitation, but you will not know what to do! There are always two options available. One, you can make a choice, knowing that if it does not work well, you can always change course. Or two, you can pose a question to the group. Both require that you be responsive to group input, either before or immediately after you make a process decision.

Responsive

Skillful facilitators use their authority to direct the process with close attention to how the group is responding to each direction they offer. Responsiveness to the group is vital. It helps a facilitator maintain the authority to lead. Groups will either rebel or fall passive when a facilitator's choices are out of sync with the group. No facilitator can be expected to guess correctly

about what needs to happen at each stage of a group process. Fortunately, group members are likely to forgive any mistaken initiatives if the facilitator is observant enough to recognize that a misstep was made.

Facilitators can ensure greater responsiveness by periodically soliciting feedback from the group. When a facilitator is unsure about how to proceed, he can pose a question to the group for either comments or a vote. For instance, a facilitator may ask the group members if they are ready to close discussion of one topic and move to the next. The question can be framed as an either/or choice. Or it can be more open, such as "What do people think needs to happen next?" Since not all group members may agree, they depend on the facilitator to assess the feedback and then choose what step would be in the best interest of the whole group.

Inspirational

A skillful facilitator must inspire the group. Sometimes, difficult group dynamics have drained group members of confidence that they can successfully work together. Past failures to cooperate may leave feelings of distrust or even contempt between participants. When people are convinced that their efforts are hopeless, they may not evidence the motivation it takes to succeed. Thus, the facilitator who can inspire a group with confidence about the potential to successfully work together will get the best results.

The good news is that there is always tremendous potential for people to work together well. Regardless of past difficulties, the advantages inherent in coordinating our efforts can vastly exceed the alternative (pursuing independent and potentially competing efforts). All we need is a process that is participatory and effective. The more experience the facilitator has in using an effective process, the more confidence she can express to the group that success is possible.

The Facilitator's Primary Responsibilities

In addition to the general qualities listed above, the facilitator has multiple ongoing responsibilities. Each stage of the CODM process has specific tasks the facilitator must accomplish. These are described in Chapters 5

Facilitators can ensure greater responsiveness by periodically soliciting feedback from the group.

through 12. Throughout the entire process, however, the following primary duties need consistent attention.

Support Full Participation
- Encourage participation from all group members.
- Support group members when they make contributions.
- Help participants clarify and condense their ideas.
- Provide empathy to help group members feel understood.
- Ask for perspectives that have not yet been spoken.
- Ensure that no individuals dominate the discussion.
- Encourage group leaders to fully participate.

Support a Collaborative Atmosphere
- Inspire confidence in the potential for successful collaboration.
- Encourage egalitarian leadership (thinking about the whole group).
- Reframe judgments and criticisms.
- Help participants identify needs and underlying concerns.
- Interrupt disrespectful interactions.
- Identify common ground as it emerges.
- Challenge the group to work together to satisfy all relevant concerns.
- Guide the group to focus together on one idea at a time.
- Facilitate participants to listen and provide empathy to each other.

Manage the Flow of the Meeting
- Develop and manage the agenda based on the group goals and available time.
- Describe the overall design of the CODM process.
- Assign and supervise participants in any needed roles (timekeeper, chart scribe, minutes-taker).
- Explain the goals and activities involved in each step as the group progresses.
- Assess the needs of the group (break, empathy, contract for more time, progress to the next step, adjourn).

- Propose alternatives to adapt the process as needed by the group (shortcuts, small groups, go-rounds, delegating tasks to committees).
- Query the group for feedback about how the process is working.
- Apply the group's decision rule to finalize decisions about content or process.

These primary responsibilities serve to keep the group members all participating, working together and efficiently progressing toward a consensus-oriented decision. There are many communication skills that are useful in fulfilling these responsibilities. Several of these skills are described in the following chapters, particularly in the Communication Skill Builder sidebars. Additional training in communication skills is also helpful to any facilitator.