

“Facilitative Leadership: Practical Skills to Create a Sustainable Culture of Engagement”

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Montgomery College is a two-year college in Montgomery County, Maryland, a suburb of the greater Washington, DC area. We are a large, multi-campus institution with an enrollment of approximately 27,000 students. We have over 1,200 staff and administrators. We have approximately 600 full time faculty and 900 part-time faculty. Our employee population reflects the diversity of our students as well as the communities of our region.

As an educational institution, Montgomery College recognizes that our ability to foster learning and enhance student success depends on the competency of the people who work with them – in all areas and levels of the institution. As a result, the College

is firmly committed to the scholarship, innovation and development of all employees. While the College supports faculty, staff and administrators in taking part in external professional development opportunities through course work, workshops, conferences and other learning experiences, the College also actively supports and provides a wide array of internal, College sponsored professional development programs. The College is also committed to growing leadership within the institution. Through our Center for Professional Organizational Development (CPOD), faculty, staff, and administrators have opportunities to develop leadership and management skills through internally developed and delivered programs such as “MC Management,” the “Academic Leadership Program” and the “Leadership Development Institute.” Each of these programs has been designed to provide opportunities for targeted employee constituencies and groups to grow and develop their leadership.

However, Montgomery College is also committed to creating a culture of sustainable leadership, and we recognize that to achieve this, employees at all levels and in all areas of the institution need to have practical skills to effectively engage and lead others. To that end, the College partnered with the Maryland State Department of Education and the local K-12 system and began using a three-day workshop curriculum, “Facilitative Leadership: Tapping the Power of Participation,” which was developed by Interaction Associates, Inc. Now in its eighth-year, the Facilitative Leadership program has proven to be a powerful tool in the College’s move toward creating an environment of engaged, collaborative colleagues. This program underlies our other leadership development opportunities because it is open to anyone in the organization, and the process, philosophy and practices emphasized throughout the workshop can be used by anyone in the organization. By employing the Facilitative Leadership philosophy, its ethos and integrated practices, the College has created a shared understanding of how work will be accomplished at the institution and has implemented a framework that supports a culture of sustainable leadership.

Overview of Facilitative Leadership

Imagine a work environment where people feel they are part of a larger, more meaningful effort, and imagine if you had strategies that promoted shared responsibility, fostered participation, and inspired commitment and engagement from your colleagues. What could you accomplish? Facilitative Leadership (FL) is a formal program of seven, practical, interrelated leadership practices that are immediately useful, but also integral to long-term growth of an organization, team or group. You can use the practices proactively to set a positive, effective environment for collaboration, but they also can be used in times of adversity or conflict to chart a course forward. Even more, Facilitative Leadership practices can be used regardless of whether you are formally “in charge” of a group or are a contributing member of a team. These practices can be used by anyone in an organization to contribute to the overall mission of the team. Further, when an organization commits to using these practices, they provide a foundation for meaningful collaboration and effective processes that allow members of the organization to develop their own leadership potential, and that provides a

framework for sustainable leadership because an organization can grow its own leaders.

The seven Facilitative Leadership (“FL”) practices were identified and refined by Interaction Associates for the formal, licensed leadership program, “Facilitative Leadership: Tapping the Power of Participation.” The FL program is based on over 40 years of observation and study of practicing leaders. The FL practices reflect interconnected actions, behaviors and mindsets that allow a leader to reach his or her best potential. The practices are adaptable to individual leadership styles, and unlike many leadership theories, they are immediately applicable and practical.

The seven practices include:

“Share an Inspiring Vision”

“Focus on Results, Process, and Relationship”

“Seek Maximum Appropriate Involvement”

Design Pathways to Action”

Facilitate Agreement

“Coach For Performance”

“Celebrate Accomplishment”

Each individual practice is important, but the true power in this leadership development program is the interaction among the practices. When used consistently and consciously, the practices of Facilitative Leadership give leaders fundamental principles and practical strategies that allow them to engage colleagues and accomplish goals as well as increase their personal satisfaction and confidence in their leadership.

For the purpose of this paper (and workshop session), we will explore the three practices “Focus on Results, Process, and Relationship,” “Facilitate Agreement,” and “Coach for Performance” in-depth as we have found these practices to be most instrumental in our work efforts; however, it is important to understand that each of the seven practices are valuable and build on each other. Therefore, a brief explanation of the remaining four practices is provided.

In **“Share an Inspiring Vision,”** you gain step-by-step strategies to develop an inspiring vision, but you also learn when and how to deliver a vision statement. In **“Seek Maximum Appropriate Involvement”** you have a framework for the types or levels of decisions and considerations regarding who needs to be involved in the decision-making process. In addition, you explore the various factors that must be considered in decision-making, and how to effectively address them so that everyone is clear on who will make the final choices and how they will be made. **“Design Pathways to Action”** sets up a process for forward momentum that emphasizes vision, results, relationship, process and engagement. In this practice, you explore how to engage others in the planning of projects. As a thread that runs throughout the whole model of leadership, **“Celebrate Accomplishment”** is a practice that bolsters relationships and engagement by

recognizing accomplishments of individuals as well as teams. Some of the practices may seem on the surface to be “common sense,” and some of them are natural habits or tendencies for many individuals. However, the power of this program’s curriculum is how it succinctly defines these practices, integrates them and provides opportunities for participants to apply them and experience how the practices bolster and reinforce each other.

Focus on Results, Process, and Relationship

Focusing on Results, Process, and Relationship is more than just a practice; it is also a mind-set. It presents a model for looking at “success” in terms of three dimensions: results, process, and relationship. Often individuals concentrate on dimensions where they are more comfortable or naturally inclined. Leadership style and personality often dictate a leader’s natural focus. For example, some leaders are more achievement-oriented and focus primarily on getting intended results, others are more affiliation-oriented and focus more on relationships in the groups they lead, while others are more control or process-oriented and focus on how the work gets done. In the FL program, you are challenged to expand your sphere by maintaining a balance among the three dimensions of success: Results, Process and Relationship, rather than emphasizing one aspect over the others.

The balance among these three dimensions of success requires a leader to articulate specific goals or performance indicators as well as clear success criteria for each of the dimensions. That means, determining the success criteria in terms of the product of the work (Results) in addition to the success criteria and performance indicators for the process and the relationships. For many, developing specific goals relating to the relationships part of the success of a project is a shift, and considering success criteria for relationships, process, and results as equal parts of overall success is a new framework for managing people.

The tri-fold dimensions of success of Results, Process and Relationship become a foundation for all six of the other facilitative practices. Each of the other practices emphasizes one of the dimensions of success. When the FL practices are used together, they allow a leader to balance the three dimensions.

Facilitate Agreement

In some ways, the practices in Facilitate Agreement are the most overt, obvious facilitation skills. In Facilitate Agreement, you explore how to turn meetings into productive work sessions. This practice draws on all the other practices to set a collaborative environment that is process driven but ensures that everyone’s voices are heard. In meetings structured with the Facilitate Agreement model, the process, format

and structure of the meeting or series of meetings is shaped by the content and the desired outcomes of the meeting. There are three formal stages of a discussion in Facilitating Agreement and specific strategies and guidelines that you follow to move through the stage. Meetings using the Facilitate Agreement model are a series of small agreements that move the group to achieve larger consensus.

In the Facilitate Agreement model, meetings begin with agreement on ground rules, a review of the process and outcomes for the meeting, and a review of the decision making process that will be used for the meeting and in the context of the larger project or plan. These are prevention strategies designed to ensure that the group is on the same page and that set the stage for agreement. The focus is on consensus not disagreement and creating a safe environment for collaboration. These prevention strategies may like seem common sense, but they make a startling difference in the effectiveness of a meeting.

The three stages of discussion include Open, Narrow, and Close. In the first stage, Open, participants offer ideas, opinions and information. In the Narrow phase, the information that was generated in the first stage is organized and evaluated; this stage includes eliminating duplicates, prioritizing the information, and advocating for or against resulting ideas. One of the reasons this stage works is that it ensures that everyone's voices are heard, and the ideas move from being an individual's ideas to being the group's ideas. In the final phase, the Close, the group works through the resulting group ideas to reconcile differences and reach agreement. Tools in this phase include Negative Poll, Build Up and Eliminate, and Both/And.

The Facilitate Agreement practice incorporates interventions that work to keep the process moving. Those interventions include: boomerang, asking what is going on, enforcing process agreements, refocusing on the agenda, outcomes and ground rules, accepting/legitimizing/dealing with or deferring, and humor, used strategically.

Facilitate Agreement uses process to facilitate content agreements. Sometimes the process can be frustrating for people since it is different from what they have used in the past, and it doesn't always feel natural; it doesn't always meet the way people are used to working or thinking. However, when consistently used, the process is powerful and results in a collaborative, effective, transparent decision making process that yields good products. It also contributes to a work environment where people are engaged and collaborative because it builds trust among the group as well as in the leader.

Coach for Performance

Many team leaders are aware of their roles as "coaches" to help other employees improve as individuals or team members, and this is certainly a key part of the FL process. However, because being a facilitative leader is a role that is not solely

limited to the formal or official leader, but instead recognizes and emphasizes that there is a “shared responsibility” for the group’s success throughout a team. By sharing responsibility, each team member is called upon to demonstrate three key attributes that foster effective communication and collaboration. By being *collaborative*, team members have the genuine intention and make a concerted effort to act in a cooperative and supportive manner. Being *strategic* means that members of the group select and employ appropriate processes or approaches for conversations to stay on track and achieve desired results. And lastly, by being receptive and flexible, members of the team demonstrate an openness to alternate ideas and a willingness to adjust their plans based on new information.

Clearly, the emphasis in Coach for Performance is not on criticism of negative results or team behaviors, but on positive encouragement, reinforcing what people do well and suggesting what they can do even better. Practical skills development is prevalent in this practice as it provides participants specific tools to help each other work more effectively together and improve both individual and team performance. A focus on active listening is a critical element of Coach for Performance; leaders need to truly hear others’ concerns and ideas in an environment of trust in order to be able to suggest creative solutions and improve team dynamics. Specific guidelines for how to respectfully provide feedback and effectively influence, guide, direct or counsel others helps to deepen the quality of communication and collaboration among team members. Coach for Performance also places an emphasis on personal responsibility, encouraging each team member to work to his or her fullest potential using a unique skill set. When multiple members of a team are aware of coaching strategies there is a shared language and context for collaboration, therefore, issues with discouragement, lack of productivity, stagnant ideas, or interpersonal dynamics can be addressed swiftly and collegially, and the team works together to strengthen working relationships and think outside of the box, leading to innovative problem solving in a positive environment of trust, support, and collaboration.

While many leadership programs provide specific strategies for improving performance, Facilitative Leadership creates an extensive, integrated framework that gives leaders a wide array of skills needed to innovate and communicate, have clear routes to decision-making, and create a positive and supportive culture of collaboration. Since Montgomery College uses the Facilitative Leadership model throughout the institution, and its supporting frameworks can be used by any member of the organization, it is a powerful tool for faculty, staff, and administrators to have shared language and practices to facilitate teamwork and decision-making. Faculty, staff and administrators throughout the institution have participated in the Facilitative Leadership program. Faculty and staff who are taking on lead roles in projects are encouraged to take “FL.” Its use throughout our organization allows any member of the institution to lead from where they are, practicing and developing leadership skills on a regular basis, which in turn creates a sustainable culture of leadership at Montgomery College.

Bibilography

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