



The Baron
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Facilitation Skills—The Invisible Skill Set

In our Consultative Selling Skills course, one of the first things we introduce is the difference between content and process. We explain that content is the what, whereas process is the how.

In virtually any interactive situation, people are strong when it comes to content. They know what questions they want to ask, what ideas they want to suggest, what issues need to be addressed and what recommendations they have to offer. Rarely do groups or individuals fail to meet their objectives because of content.

Process is the culprit. When we don't work as well as we can, it is usually due to process related issues. We may know what we want to say or do; we don't always know how to say it or how to do it. Whether it applies to positioning interactions, collecting data, making suggestions, managing resistance or gaining commitment, when groups work together, how they do these things is what usually prevents them from accomplishing all of their objectives.

That is why when critically important meetings are conducted—whether it is a creative session, strategic planning session, teambuilding session or even a sales conference, many companies will use a facilitator. The facilitator is the person who manages the process. The facilitator becomes the “traffic cop”; the facilitator focuses on the “how” issues.

If you were to develop a job description for a facilitator, you would suggest that this is the person who helps plan the meeting, get it off to a good start, clarify the agenda, set a healthy climate, keep the group focused and on track, minimize the distractions, resolve conflict and involve everyone. A facilitator does what he or she can to ensure a successful meeting. A facilitator focuses on process.

Surprisingly, this is also the role of the salesperson in the selling situation. Of course, the salesperson has lots to do with respect to content. But the salesperson is also responsible for managing the process. Salespeople who think of themselves as facilitators usually conduct more effective sales calls.

The salesperson prepares everyone for the client meeting beforehand. The salesperson coordinates introductions. The salesperson helps establish the climate and put everyone at ease. The salesperson confirms the agenda, sets the time contract and ensures that everyone is on the same page. These are all facilitation principles.

The salesperson decides when to move from one part of the meeting to the next. He or she “hits the clutch” and does things like preparing the client for questioning, reviewing the needs, seeking feedback and moving towards closure. Again, these are facilitation activities.

The salesperson keeps the meeting moving and ensures that the agenda is accomplished. The salesperson calls on his or her reserves when necessary. The salesperson leads the questioning process, initiates the presentation and takes over if conflict arises. And the

salesperson puts together the action plan with specific next steps. In other words, one more time, the salesperson facilitates the meeting.

Someone needs to focus on process if the meeting is going to be as effective as possible. The salesperson is usually the one to do that. If for some reason someone else needs to play that role, that's fine, as long as it is a conscious decision. Remember, these skills are less visible, but they have significant impact.

So when you plan your next sales call, ask yourself what you can do to manage the process more effectively. What are some of those "how" issues you want to address? If you think of yourself as a facilitator, it will be much easier and you will do it more effectively. And you will experience a more productive sales call.