Cutting the Ties That Bind

By Rosaria Taraschi

When building teams, companies often overlook the amount of support and attention members need to get established and comfortable. The facilitator and the organization need to do a lot of up-front planning and keep paying attention to how the team is settling in. Support, encouragement, and gentle prodding seem like good things. However, those tactics can sometimes result in a codependent relationship that robs a team of its ability to reach its true potential (and drains the facilitator—you!).

An intact work group, suddenly faced with the challenge of working as a team, may look to you for answers, support, and reinforcement. Although the group may have been functioning well under its old mission, the call to change may leave some members struggling to determine their new roles. Unwittingly, you can become the group's internal expert, coach, change agent, manager of interpersonal difficulties, and so forth. The more you respond in those ways, the more the group will look to you to handle those tasks. The more you take on, the less likely that the team will gain the skills it needs.

The best way to break the cycle is not to let dependency begin. It starts early and gains strength over time. By being aware of the common stages of team development and knowing how to focus your facilitative efforts, you can empower the team at the outset. Most of us are familiar with the team-building stages of forming, storming, norming, and performing. Here's how to use those stages to teach your team members how to become masterful self-facilitators.

Even if your team isn't new or is beyond the forming stage, the following strategies can help. If you focus your efforts based on the current stage of your group's development, you can strengthen its self-facilitative skills. Gradually, team members will gain appropriate facilitation skills from their foundation of interpersonal skills.

The forming stage

During the initial stages of development, the primary concern of new team members is to be included. They typically wonder: "How do I fit here?" "What's expected of me?" They may think that if they speak out they're misbehaving, so they don't express their negative feelings—they don't want to rock the boat. They look to the facilitator for guidance and assistance. That can be the beginning of a long-term dependency.

Here are some things you can do to encourage team responsibility from the start.

Help the team develop ground rules, and explain their use. Encourage team members to assume responsibility not only for adhering to the ground rules, but also for enforcing them. Provide a mini lesson on how to intervene regarding breaking the rules:

❑ Make a statement or ask a question that describes the inappropriate behavior, and correlate it to the ground rules. Example: *Joe, one of our ground rules is no cheap shots. When Sarah offered her idea, you said "You need to get out of the office more, Sarah."*

❑ Invite comment. This step isn't always necessary, but it can be used to help someone recognize his or her behavior and its effect on the team.

❑ Request that the person change his or her behavior to be more consistent with the ground rules, or suggest the desired behavior. Example*: What did you intend by that? Or, I felt that comment was a cheap shot. Would you be willing to hear how Sarah's idea might work?*

Clarify roles. Working with the team, define and spell out in specific terms (preferably written) the roles of facilitator, team member, and team leader. That not only establishes immediate ownership for the success of the team, but also individual responsibility for fulfilling roles and expectations.

Check progress. Team progress or process checks are an easy way to encourage team ownership of results and how the team works together to achieve them. Progress checks are led by the facilitator and are usually the last item on a meeting agenda. Each member is asked to respond to a few questions—such as, What did we do well? What did we not do well? What do we need to do differently the next time? The facilitator asks the questions one at a time. Team members take turns answering, and then the facilitator offers his or her view.

The storming stage

Once team members are oriented, they should focus on being heard and having control. At this stage, conflict is often evident. As facilitator, your focus should be on group dynamics and positive confrontation to help team members find workable ways to address their differences. This is the stage at which many teams (and facilitators) either make it or break it.

Get the team to own responsibility for recognizing and addressing difficulties. A key role of the facilitator during this stage is to play back the specifics of what's happening. Example: *Paul, you just said to Eileen "There's no way I'll go for that" and suggested another alternative. Before you talk about how your idea will work, would you be willing to paraphrase what Eileen proposed and state your concerns?*

Use graduated interventions. Make observations aloud to get team members to see the effect of their actions or behaviors on others personally and on the team and its tasks. Example: *Patti, that's the third time you rolled your eyes as John talked about his concerns. Have you noticed how John has responded to that?* (Patti's response: "Yes, he said, 'If you cared about anything other than your promotion, you wouldn't be so blind.'") *How do you think these exchanges between the two of you are affecting the team?*

The norming stage

By now, team members have worked their way through the struggles in the storming stage. They have become comfortable giving and receiving feedback, taking risks, and taking steps to balance everyone's participation. Now, in the norming stage, they should focus their energies on being open and encouraging others. Your primary focus as facilitator is to uncover unspoken issues and promote the full exploration of ideas. You should make such statements as:

❑ *Why do you think you were so effective today? Or, Why do you suppose you had such difficulty?*

❑ *I sense that you're not comfortable with what has been proposed, Ron. You*

	FORMING	STORMING	NORMING	PERFORMING
Team Focus	Inclusion: "Why are we here?"	Control: "I want to have my say."	Openness: "Let's do it."	Success: "Wow, we're great!"
Typical Team Behaviors	Dependent on leader/ facilitator Uneven/tentative participation Quiet defiance Polite conversation	Conflict Question leadership, authority, rules Verbal/nonverbal resistance Dysfunctional behavior Frustration	Give/receive feedback Encourage others Active listening Recognize and discuss differences Trust and comfort	Task appears to be effortless Interdependence develops Balanced, supportive participation Differences valued and discussed candidly
Facilitator Focus	To model openness, disclosure, and active listening	To help the team recognize group dynamics and address conflict positively	To uncover unspoken issues and encourage self-critique	To teach the team to self-facilitate
Facilitator Behaviors	Listen, especially to what is not said. Be attuned to nonverbal cues that signal apprehension. Intervene. Demonstrate disclosure by expressing your feelings. Ensure objective, goals, and agenda are clear. Use icebreakers to encourage disclosure. Ask team members to clarify their assignments at close of meeting.	Pay particular attention to group dynamics. Be specific when describing behaviors. Encourage team members to discuss their feelings. Encourage team members to discuss their interests versus their positions.	Immediately point out nonconformance to ground rules. Encourage self-critique. Encourage the full exploration of ideas. Explore inferences.	Plan with the team leader how to share leadership role. Coach the team in facilitator skills. Plan brief sessions for the team to recognize progress. Encourage reinforcing and redirecting feedback.

haven't said anything in the past 10 minutes. What's going on?

❑ *Janet, each time the group mentions the benchmarking visit, you drop your eyes and start to doodle. Were you aware you were doing that? What are your concerns?*

This stage is also a great time to provide idea-generation tools that stretch people's thinking or encourage differences of opinion. Devil's Advocate is an exercise in which one team member is appointed the devil's advocate and has to argue why certain ideas or proposals won't work.

The performing stage

This stage leads to the final handoff. The definition of final handoff, however, depends on the type of team. But in general, a handoff means transferring most or all of a facilitator's typical duties to the team. Your key focus is to encourage the team to become self-facilitating. It's here that the ties that bind are cut.

The process of letting go, although simple, is difficult for many facilitators. There are two reasons why some don't let go and the dependency deepens. One, it feels good to be the expert or advisor. Two, the more skilled a facilitator is, the more second nature his or her responses are. So when an issue crops up that the team could handle on its own, the facilitator steps in automatically.

The process for empowering a team to become self-facilitating is Socratic. By asking the right questions, you can get a team to recognize what's happening (observe its own process) and determine what to do. It's here that you need to draw on your questioning abilities. These six steps will help you hone them.

1. Ask a question that causes the team to recognize what's happening. Example: *What's happening right now?* (Team response: "We're foundering. We probably need to use some kind of process to hash this out.")

2. Check members' understanding. Rather than give the answer, ask a question that will help you determine whether the team has the skills and knowledge to address what's happening. Example: *You say some kind of process will help. What process? What do you think you need to do?*

3. Check your understanding. This means paraphrasing what was said. Example: *You said you could probably look at the pros and cons of each idea, one at a time.*

4. Ask outcome questions. This step involves helping the team see the link between the proposed approach and the desired results. Rather than correct team members or elaborate on their ideas, ask questions that encourage them to test the ideas. Example: *How will that help you overcome the difficulties you were having?* (Team response: "It will force us to look at one alternative at a time and thoroughly explore it.") *Will that provide you with all of the*

The process of letting go, although simple, is difficult for many facilitators; it feels good to be the expert or advisor.

information you need to make an informed decision? (Team response: "Probably not. We need some data from X, and we should probably see how our customers would feel about it.")

5. Offer relevant observations and experience, if needed. Wait until this step to offer your suggestions, assistance, or expertise. If the team can't resolve barriers to success using steps 1 through 4, ask a leading question that will determine its direction. Example: *I think those are both good approaches. Is there any value in checking those alternatives with some others outside the group?*

6. Ask "What will you do?" This final step gives you an opportunity to check the end result and action plan. If those are OK, the team then puts its plan to work.

Knowing that a team depends on you can be satisfying. Ironically, the skills for putting yourself in the background are greater than for staying at the forefront. Team independence is the best measure of a facilitator's success. A mediocre facilitator tells a team what to do, a good one demonstrates and encourages, a superlative one inspires and motivates. But the absolute best facilitators are able to step aside and allow a team to take charge.

Rosaria Taraschi *is a vice president with Take Charge Consultants, 103 Garris Road, Box 99, Downingtown, PA 19335; 800.282.7209; rosaria@ takechargeinc.com.*