Assessing Simple to Complex Client Needs:

What, When, Why, How ©

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Introduction

One of the first things we do as we set out to do our "work" as facilitators is talk to our clients about what they need in terms of facilitation services. In this learning module, we look at:

- What are the steps of client needs assessment?
- Who should you interview to determine client needs?
- How do you determine their needs?

Your job is to find out what they really need, decide if you can do it given your experience level, and then if yes, what to charge them. This module provides you with three tools for each stage of the needs assessment process. The first two tools are for relatively simple client work. The last tool is a rating tool to use after you have had one or more initial conversations with the client, and you discover there are many elements of complexity or challenge to the work they are asking you to do. This tool will allow you to test how difficult the job may be and if you might need extra help or budget to successfully do it.

One of the first things we do as we set out to do our "work" as facilitators is talk to our clients about what they need…

What are the Six Steps of Client Needs Assessment?

A client request might appear initially to be very simple. For example, they might approach you by saying: "We have completed our strategic plan and we want to assess how well we did." Or, "We want to create a mission statement." In these cases, the client appears clear and the task appears straightforward. Unfortunately, it is rarely that simple because the client may not know what they really need. In other cases, the person who first approaches you might be quite vague and unsure about what they need. I often get requests that sound like this: "We need someone to come do team-building for two days or to facilitate our annual staff retreat. How much do you charge for this?" Whatever the first request is, you will need to do some probing to understand their needs.

Different facilitators go through one or more of these six suggested steps. For a comprehensive assessment, I suggest all of these steps when possible. It ensures a better product, less conflict or time-wasting miscommunication throughout the job, and increases the chances of success for both you and the client group.

Step 1: One person (potential Client representative) contacts you with initial "one or two line" request…

You could first respond by saying: "I am delighted to help you think about what you need. May I ask you just a few questions now so that I can

really think about what you need? And then, if it seems like we should go further, we can set up a time to do a more in-depth information gathering session. Is this acceptable to you?"

Use Tool 1 on page 4 and 5 for this step. The goal of this step is to intrigue them enough to have them want to have a longer conversation with you and for you to find out if you want to go further with them.

Step 2: You are having your first longer conversation with one or more people from the client group…

In this step, you can ask them a version of the questions from Tool 2 outlined on page 5 and 6. Your goal in this step is to better understand what is going on with this group so you can decide if you are the right person to help them. You also want to leave them feeling confident that you could be a really good match for them.

Step 3: You are digging deeper with them about the complexity of the event they want you to facilitate…

Tool 3 will help you do this. You could check off any elements of complexity that might be present by posing the questions associated with this tool on page 8. Your goal here is to determine that there are no surprises or hidden elements when quoting on budget later. You generally need to add substantial budget or resources for more complex events.

Step 4: Based on your earlier communication, you draft a set of written key objectives and propose a budget that will work for you and your client…

The purpose – including both what you want people to know, understand or decide, and what experience you want people to have.

Step 5: You negotiate around the purpose and the budget and sign a letter of agreement or contract to do the proposed scope of work.

See page 11 for an example letter you can customize for each client job.

Step 6: You meet with a larger group of client members at a staff, Board or community meeting to test assumptions, purpose and begin to develop and test the process.

Tool One: The First Contact with Client

The first four questions to ask the client on first contact could be versions of the following:

1. **Who** is your group? Name, size, mandate (helps you determine if they are in your preferred target group)
2. **When** are you hoping to have this event happen and is this a fixed date? (make sure you are available to help them and tells you how much time they have for this project in their initial thinking at least)
3. **Why** are you calling on a facilitator at this time in your group's history? (tells you about some of the emotional history that might be happening with the group or organization)
4. **Who** will make a decision about hiring a facilitator (and your budget for this)? (Lets you know if you need to get someone else involved in the second round and if budget is a concern).

If you are both still open to continuing an expanded conversation, you might say: "It looks like an interesting project and I am available in that timeframe." Then proceed to the following questions:

- **What** do you need from me to go to the next step? (Lets you know if they need a résumé, references or a proposal)
- **Who** else might be helpful to be part of the next conversation?" (They might initially say "no one – I am just making a preliminary round of calls to a few different facilitators"). If this happens, you can prompt them again at a later time if it seems like you might be a good fit for the request and the client group.
- **When** would be a good time to talk about this in more detail? (if relevant)

Who should you interview to determine client needs?

The above steps suggest it is good idea to talk to more than just the first person who contacts you. Why? The first person may not know much about the group dynamics or hidden agendas. This person may not have decision-making power. So in step 2, it is useful to have more than one person in the room or on the call. This might include one or two other key representatives with various perspectives of the group, including senior and mid level leadership, frontline staff, and volunteers if they are an important part of the group. Your client is not only the person who pays the bill but more importantly, the group you will facilitate. Therefore, you need to get a sense of the group as well as the leader of the group. In step 6, the majority of the group needs to "meet" via email, conference call or in person before you show up at the site. They need to already know they can trust you and know you will hold their needs in account - not just the needs of the boss.

You do <u>not</u> need to meet with the entire group before the event, but if you can, it is a good idea. Ask if you can attend the first part of a staff, Board or committee or

community meeting. You can also ask them to pull together an ad hoc planning group to work with you for the duration of the project. If the group includes people in other parts of your country or from several countries, you can set up a conference call. The goal is to ensure you have good access to a wide range of client information and to the decision- makers before the event.

How to determine their needs?

A series of sequenced questions is the best way to "test for their needs" (see Tool Two below for examples). In short, you are trying to determine the following: what is the situation – past, present and desired future? Who is this group – organizationally – mission, values, group dynamics – past and present and desired future?

Tool Two: What to Ask in the Second Contact with the Client Group?

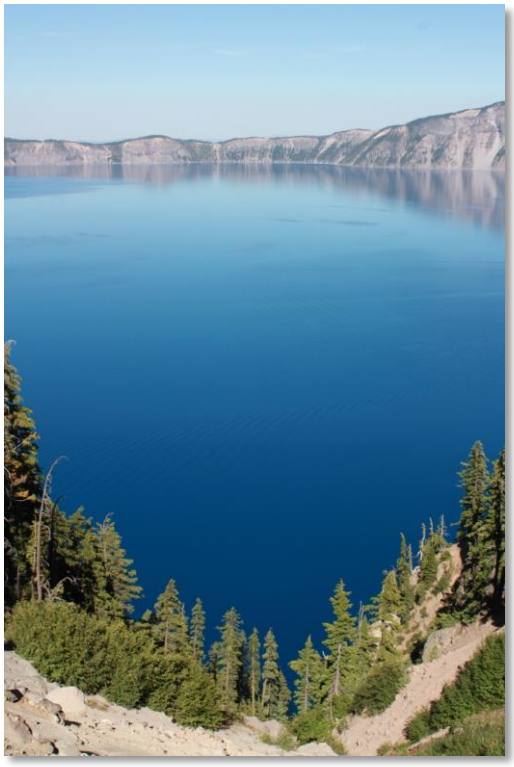
Below are some core questions we might ask clients and representatives of the client groups who want us to facilitate a session with them. Ask these and other questions in the order that most makes sense for your client. [1]

Who – Understanding the Participants

- Who are the participants and the organization (how many will be attending)?
- What's their relationship to the question being discussed?
- What's the demographic background of the group?
- How well do people know each other?
- Who else should be there?
- When have they experienced a facilitator before?
- What did the group like about previous facilitated events?

Why – Understanding the Problem

- What problem are you trying to solve?
- How strongly do you feel about the issue?
- What have you tried before to solve this problem?
- What is the history of the problem?



[1] Also see the learning module *100+ Great Questions* at www.northstarfacilitators.com.

- What ideas do you have for solving the problem?
- How long has this been an issue?
- How bad does this problem feel to the group (e.g., on a scale of 1-10)?

When, Where, and How Much – Understanding the Logistics

- What decisions have already been made about logistics (e.g., do you have a room chosen for the event)?
- Where is it going to be held?
- Who else will be assigned to work with me to plan the best possible agenda?
- What is the budget?
- What time of day is the best starting and ending time?
- What refreshments or meals will be provided?

Products and Follow-Up – Understanding Outcomes

- What are you trying to avoid in the future by having a facilitated session?
- What is the most important outcome for this group at the end of the session?
- How will you know that you have been successful?
- How will this event compliment your mission and values?
- What kind of document do you need from the event?
- What type of follow-up is planned?
- Who will be responsible for monitoring progress or doing the follow-up after the event?

Tool Three: Evaluating Complex Needs

Sometimes, you get asked to do a larger event – with more people, more issues or more time. For example, I was approached recently in the following way: "We need someone to facilitate our conference. All you have to do is moderate the conference speakers and summarize pieces of the conference. We have already determined the agenda and we'll go over it with you beforehand so you are comfortable with each piece." If I stopped there, I might have said "fine". It is only a day and a half and I am available and it sounds easy. I put my antennae out however, when I heard the word "moderator" – it did not sound quite right. So my first question was: Why do you need a facilitator? They then said, "Well, we want people to have real input into and ownership of the decision we are trying to make." Further probing revealed the following elements of complexity:

- Cultural diversity - over 40 countries would be represented
- Languages spoken/jargon, see above-20% did not speak the conference language
- Differing levels of responsibility and authority or overlapping systems - two organizations – one global and one USA based trying to collaborate
- Widely varying participant needs –

different countries had different sizes of operations from very small and informal to large and multi-layered

- Size and Space – a large space to hold over 150 people was needed
- Need for difficult organizational change – the organization was trying to get everyone to accept a radical new way of doing business
- A large amount of information to process or address – over 20 topics were to be covered in 1.5 days
- Different groups have different information – everyone was arriving with different information
- Sense of urgency – the conference was 6 weeks away and they just decide they really needed a facilitator
- Unrealistic expectations – they had over 2-4 speakers lined up for every topic!
- Time issues – as above

How did I respond? I went through steps 1 to 5. Unfortunately, due to the global nature of the conference, the short time frame and the task load of my main client-planning group, I was not able to test our approach with a larger group. I did however, realize this was a very complex event and negotiated bringing in two trusted colleagues who lived in the city where the event was to take place. I also asked for and got much more than the original budget offered.

How to use Tool 3

Tool 3 on the next page allows you to do a quick check to test for complexity. The way we use it is for the facilitator to ask questions (see page 9-10 for questions) of the client group that are related to each element on the checklist and probe deeper where they say yes to any element of complexity. Once you've checked off more than 5, you know you are facing a more difficult job. We typically increase the price by 3-4X our normal rates when 5-10 elements of complexity are present. It often means hiring other facilitators, or training people in-house or dealing with a lot of different people and extra logistics to ensure overall flow of an event.

Tool 3: Evaluating the difficulty of your assignment *Aspects to consider: Identify which elements below are present for your group.*	**Present? (Yes or no)**
1. **Divergent paradigms and perspectives**: Old paradigms clashing with new. Different paradigms. Strong and/or divergent opinions. Different values.	
2. **Cultural diversity or tension:** Cultural diversity, tension, and/or differences	
3. **Languages spoken/jargon:** Language barriers. Technical terms. Jargon.	
4. **Controversy:** Controversial subject matter. Political issues. Media intervention.	
5. **History of failure or tension:** Skeletons in the closet. Old history. Things that keep nagging. Participant emotions.	
6. **Differing levels of responsibility and authority or overlapping systems:** Different levels of authority or responsibility, e.g., headquarters - regional - local levels.	
7. **Multiple issues and disciplines**: Many different subjects or issues. Multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary approach required. Multiple objectives.	
8. **Sense of urgency:** There is a strong need for a new way of doing something.	
9. **Widely varying participant needs:** Participants have widely varying needs, e.g. differing sizes of communities or differing socio-economic situations. Need to accommodate side-effects of travel (for both participants and facilitators).	
10. **Size and Space:** Large number of participants. Need to match space with the number of participants and their needs. Inappropriate or inadequate location or space.	
11. **Unfamiliarity with process:** Participants unfamiliar with open, participatory, and facilitated processes. "Saboteurs" and "disruptors". Expect to be told what to do.	
12. **Unfamiliarity with the current problem or decision that needs to be made.** Participants may not be aware, informed of real problem, or authorized to know all the background related to the problem.	
13. **Need for difficult organizational change:** Need for significant or long-term cultural or organizational change. Resistance to change/Re-organization/Downsizing.	
14. **Global or international issues:** International setting, issues or context.	
15. **Low levels of trust and confidence:** Existence of low levels or trust or a sense of betrayal among participants. Disconnection with leadership.	
16. **Low levels of empowerment and choice:** Feeling that things are out of participants' control. Mandated versus a voluntary project. Participants give project a low chance of success. Questionable management intent.	
17. **Lack of clarity of purpose and outcomes:** Issue or problem is not well-defined or well understood.	
18. **Limited financial or other resources.** Can result in poor space, unskilled facilitator, insufficient assistance, discomfort of participants due to poor conditions.	
19. **No skills for discussion or decision-making.**	
20. **Lack of team cohesion.** Group members don't know each other or have not worked together enough to make wise decisions.	
21. **A large amount of information to process or address.** Many facts or significant technical information to digest prior to any decision-making needed	
22. **Different groups have different information.** Different members come to table with contradictory understandings and knowledge	
23. **Unrealistic expectations.** Too many issues to cover in the time allotted.	
24. **Time issues.** Usually too little time to process issues in depth needed; schedule does not allow long enough time slots to achieve depth discussion.	

Possible Questions to Ask for Each Element of Complexity

Use or modify any of these questions to help you and the client be clearer on their organizational environment.

Divergent paradigms and perspectives:

- What are the range and diversity of perspectives on this issue/project/proposal?
- How long have people been involved and how vested are they in certain outcomes?

Cultural diversity or tension

- What are the different cultures that are represented in your group (e.g., age, organizational, racial, gender, professional, internal, external)?

Languages spoken/jargon:

- What specific technical terms or jargon need to be understood with this group?
- What languages barriers or issues exist?

Controversy:

- What are the odds of project success?
- What are the major threats to this project?

History of failure or tension:

- What is the history of this project and those involved with it? What have been the past difficulties?

Differing levels of responsibility & authority:

- What are all the levels of authority and responsibility involved in this project?
- What is the level of commitment of senior decision-makers to this project?

Multiple issues and disciplines:

- Which different issues, disciplines and technical topics do participants represent?

Sense of urgency:

- What forces are contributing to a sense of urgency to resolve the issues?

Widely varying participant needs:

- How would you describe the different groups participating in this event and their varying needs?

Large numbers:

- What organizations and individuals need to be involved in this process to be successful?
- Who needs to be involved in this process to guard against its failure?

Unfamiliarity with process:

- How open are participants to an inclusive, facilitated process?

Need for difficult organizational change:

- What organizational changes, including significant culture changes, are desired in the long term?

Global or international issues:

- Where are participants coming from?

- What accommodations in schedule, meeting location and meeting design are needed?
- Are the issues of interest international?

Low levels of trust and confidence:

- How would you describe levels of trust among participants?
- In past events, how have results been used?

Low levels of empowerment and choice:

- Is this a mandated or voluntary project?
- How do participants see their roles and influence on decisions?

Low clarity of purpose and outcomes:

- What would each of clients, participants, and senior decision-makers say are the outcomes that need to be achieved?

Resources

- *Workshop Design When There Are No Easy Answers* feedback from over 100 facilitators from 6 workshops 2003-2004. Barbara MacKay and Ruth Siguenza
- Annie Bentz, personal communication. Office of affirmative Action, University of Oregon, 2009.
- IAF handbook of Group Facilitation. Chapter 1: The big picture: creating an Ongoing client Relationship by Nadine Bell and Susan Nurre; Chapter 2: The Skilled Facilitator: Roger Schwartz
- Roger Schwartz. 2008. No bad contracting goes unpunished. IAF conference workshop. Atlanta, GA, USA.

Example PROFESSIONAL SERVICE AGREEMENT

This Professional Service Agreement (Agreement) is made and entered into this ____day of (month and year), between (Client) and (the Contractor). This Agreement shall be renewable pending consent of both parties. The terms and conditions of this Agreement may only be amended through a written agreement that is signed by both parties.

The parties agree to the following scope of work, terms and conditions of the Agreement, which are for the purpose of providing facilitation services on (Date) in (City, State) and help staff plan and design all related aspects of the facilitation session.

AGREEMENT

1. **SCOPE OF WORK**

   The Contractor agrees to provide the following services to (Client):

   - Pre-work including regular phone and email consultation with planning committee and (name of key contact). Also includes "design" and meeting preparation time related to all related aspects of the event, finalizing schedule and agendas, drafting invitation to participants, managing the budget and reviewing website and other relevant background reading to ensure a meaningful and facilitated event.
   - Deliver two day facilitated event on (date) to X (number) board and staff of (organization's name). Provide on-site co-facilitation services as needed.
   - Document outcomes and province a brief (10 pages or less) written report
   - Participate in a debrief call to ensure next steps are clear with in two weeks after following the event. Assist with other questions related to follow-up over the next 6 months (up to 3 calls or emails).

2. **OBJECTIVES**

   Put in Day 1 & Day 2 purpose here

3. **COMPENSATION**

   (Client) shall contract with the Contractor (your company name) for the provision of facilitation services The Contractor will be paid $XXX, airfare, ground transportation, hotel for XX nights and any meals and incidentals not covered by (Client).

4. **BILLING AND PAYMENT PROCEDURE**

   The Contractor shall submit an invoice and expense receipts to client name for services provided at the end of each month.

Your client's organizational name	Contractor: your name Your company name
Signed: _____	Signed: _____
Name: _____	Name: _____
Title: _____	Title: _____
Date: _____	Date: _____

Your Guide and Author of This Module:

Barbara MacKay

Barbara MacKay, MS, CPF©, principal of North Star Facilitators, specializes in strategic planning and large group or complex facilitation processes. She is now offering multiple virtual trainings and coaching others to become competent facilitators.

Barbara is currently mentoring facilitators from all over the world and cares deeply about passing on the skills to others so the world becomes a just, peaceful and creative place.

Barbara's strong interpersonal communication skills and experience allow her to work skillfully with a wide variety of participant perspectives.

Barbara specializes in helping groups participate, problem-solve, plan and make progress in challenging and complex situations. She is focused, respectful, compassionate and present as a facilitator, trainer and coach. Barbara has worked with hundreds of clients from all sectors with her own company since 1995. She provided social, economic and environmental consulting and facilitation services with many indigenous groups throughout Canada from 1981 to 1995.

Barbara is: Certified facilitator and USA trainer with the International Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA Canada); Certified Professional Facilitator (CPF©) and assessor of other facilitators world-wide with the International Association of Facilitators (IAF); Professional Development Strategic Initiative Coordinator for the IAF for four years; was an Adjunct professor with University of Oregon and Portland State University (Not for Profit Management Institute); certified OneSmartWorld™ trainer; trained in Disaster Crisis Intervention for facilitators; certified accelerated learning trainer; trained extensively in: conflict resolution, Constructivist Listening and Cross Cultural Communication and Alliance Building, visioning processes, Mind Mapping™, Behavior styles model "Why Are You Like That?™", and Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI). She is also trained in and teaches about learning organizations, organizational development mapping for organizations and strategic thinking for leaders.

Graphic design of this module by skilled facilitator colleague, Mari Mizobe Chu (www.marimchu.com) and Ben Marcus. Photography by Barbara MacKay and Ben Marcus.