Part I
Concepts and Practice

1

Key Elements of Facilitating Group Games

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Introduction

To be an outstanding facilitator or host in leading group games, in addition to possessing extensive knowledge and proficient skills, the most important thing is to accumulate a vast amount of experience. Since group games are experiential activities, every game a facilitator leads offers distinct experiences, lessons, and conclusions. Through the accumulation of different experiences, it is possible to develop a deep understanding of game functions and learn more about our own leading style. Constant self-reflection and sharing will also help to develop a better grasp of the key elements of leading group games. This chapter focuses on exploring the three key elements of leading group games, including the functions of group games, essential qualities of the facilitator, and common methods of leading games.

Functions of group games

Games have many positive functions in group activities (Kroehnert, 2002; Lindsay & Orton, 2008; Scannell & Scannell, 2010; Shalaev et al., 2019). They have been shown to:

1. adjust the body and mind, evoke pleasant feelings and emotions;

2. help group members warm up and participate more actively in group activities;

3. "break the ice" and reduce unfamiliarity and defensiveness among group members;

4. facilitate mutual understanding between group members and provide more opportunities for group members to interact;

5. build up relationships among group members;

6. promote team spirit, communication, and cohesion of the group;

7. facilitate the growth and development of the group and its members; and

8. enhance problem solving and self-awareness skills of group members and promote their personal growth.

In addition to these functions, group games can also be used to help build relationships between the facilitator and participants, enhance knowledge of others in the group, and encourage the group to focus on the "theme" of their meeting. These benefits are discussed below.

Building relationships between the group facilitator and group members

Not only can group games help build relationships among group members, but it can also establish closer relationships between the group facilitator and the participants during the games. The group facilitator is usually viewed by the group members as an authority figure with a higher status. This is particularly pronounced during the early stages of the meeting when group members are unfamiliar with the facilitator and thus avoid taking the initiative to communicate with them. However, playing games with the group members more frequently helps break the ice between the two parties. The joyful and pleasant atmosphere brought about by games can easily bring everyone closer, allowing the facilitator to mingle with the group members more quickly.

Enhancing knowledge about each group member

Group members naturally reveal their most authentic qualities during the games. Games provide ample opportunities for facilitators to learn about the personalities of the group members, characteristics of how they get along with the others, communication methods, and leadership abilities. Therefore, the facilitator should ensure that they observe the performance of each team member during the game. If the facilitator can increase group members' participation in the game during the early stage of their meeting or activity, then they will be able to more quickly and

comprehensively grasp the characteristics of each group member. Doing so will also be helpful in increasing group members' participation in future group activities and provide cues for handling the group dynamics in non-game activities, as well as helping the facilitator design other suitable group games and activities.

Focusing on the theme of the group meeting

In addition to helping group members warm up, break the ice, get to know each other, and establish relationships, games can also bring out the theme of group meetings naturally. For example, after group members have played the game "Weave a spider web" (see Game 44 in this book), they are often more conscious of needing to establish and use a "supportive network" later in the meeting or non-game activities. Presenting a theme using games encourages group members to participate sooner and establishes trust and confidence, making the rest of the meeting and non-game activities proceed more smoothly as well as helping the facilitator to effectively and confidently achieve the group meeting objectives.

Qualities of the game facilitator

While playing group games can be immensely beneficial, whether a game is successful and well-received depends heavily upon the skills and personality of the game facilitator. While briefing/debriefing and leadership skills can often be developed through study and experience, the facilitator can also enhance the success of the game by possessing the following positive characteristics or qualities.

The facilitator should enjoy playing the game

The most important quality of a game facilitator is not their proficient and lively skills, but rather, the facilitator's genuine pleasure in the game they are leading. If they genuinely enjoy playing the game, no matter how many times they have played it, then they will still enjoy leading it and will find new

pleasure every time. This joy has a huge contagious effect on the group members (Le Fevre, 2002). The group members can sense that their facilitator is not leading the game as a work responsibility but that they are interested in the participants and outcome. This can greatly increase participation. Therefore, the facilitator must treat each leading opportunity as a new experience and bring positive energy to the game every time.

The facilitator should enjoy playing with the group members

Many game facilitators think that their sole responsibility is to clearly explain the steps and rules of the game, and then let the group members play it, acting only as an observer with minimal interaction with the group. However, in addition to their role as a referee and encouraging participation at the start of the game, an outstanding facilitator should also join the group members and play the game with them. Doing so offers many benefits. For instance, playing the game with the group will allow the facilitator to better determine if all the group members understand the rules of the game. Facilitator participation creates a sense of equality and collective spirit, and establishes a relationship between the facilitator and the group members, bringing everyone closer. It also allows the facilitator to learn about the characteristics and motivations of each group member while playing together and to boost group members' interest in the game as well as in subsequent non-game activities. Finally, the more the facilitator plays with the group members, the more they will feel welcomed and the easier it will be to get along with each other in other games and non-game activities.

The facilitator should strive to create a fun atmosphere

To avoid a dull game, the facilitator must set the ambiance and create a fun mood before and during the game. Not only does a game require the participation of group members (and the facilitator, as explained above), but it also requires the facilitator to sometimes create a humorous, amusing, exciting, or competitive atmosphere

while briefing/debriefing or in side conversations during the game, so as to increase the participation of group members and make the game more fun (Scannell & Scannell, 2010). However, the facilitator must intervene at appropriate times and must not assert too much influence while trying to create a good vibe. The facilitator should also not act like a machine when it comes to explaining the rules and making sure group members comply with them, but should instead be adept at igniting group members' passion for the game and act as a catalyst for participation. In addition to making sure group members are having fun, the facilitator also needs to remember to have fun in the game (which feeds back into the facilitator genuinely enjoying the game and the trickle-down effect this has on the group members).

Methods of facilitating group games

The qualities above will set the stage for the games. There are also other abilities and methods facilitators will develop with experience. Seven ideas and skills facilitators should consider are explained below.

Clearly identify the objective of the game before choosing it

Game facilitators usually arbitrarily choose a game that they have played and enjoyed playing before without first identifying the objective of the game, making "having fun" the primary consideration for choosing the game. While having fun is an essential aspect of game facilitation, it should not be the only criterion when choosing what game to play with a particular group. The facilitator needs to first figure out whether the game matches or achieves the group's objective, and only after deciding what this objective or message is can the most suitable game be chosen. This may involve some trial and error, with the facilitator making appropriate improvements to the chosen game after it is used in preparation for a similar situation in the future. Games that were fun in the past may not fully accommodate the current objective. Group games are just tools; if not used properly, they cannot

and will not produce the desired results. Thus, game facilitators must spend some time and effort to clarify their objectives before designing and choosing a suitable game.

Games should not only be played at the beginning of a meeting

Many people believe games should only be played during the early stages of a group gathering or meeting as a way to help group members warm up, get to know each other, and build relationships. However, these functions are also needed at every other stage of the meeting. Since achieving the meeting objectives is typically an incremental process, instead of only having games in the beginning, it is best to have games at various stages to achieve the best result. This also relates to the theme of the meeting or that stage of the meeting. For example, while games at the start of a meeting may focus on warming up, some similar games should also be played in the middle of the meeting when group members start to show signs of tiredness or decreased concentration. These games can help them loosen up and relax, and to facilitate continued participation in the group activities. Before the meeting is over, different games can be used to help group members summarise their feelings and share the lessons they have learned from the meeting (not just during the games). These late-stage games can also help build support and boost morale of group members. Therefore, there is not a fixed formula stipulating when games must be played. The facilitator needs to be aware of changes in the objectives over the course of the meeting as well as the overall dynamics of the group members and then decide what games would be appropriate at those times. Similarly, when groups will have multiple meetings, games should not only be played at the first of these but would be beneficial at each subsequent meeting as well.

Determine when changes need to be made to a game

Regardless of how interesting a game is, once it has been played too many times, it will inevitably lose its novelty. Therefore, game facilitators should work hard to discover new games and rack their brains to design new activities. However, this does not always have to involve inventing something completely new. A game can often be "re-invented" by modifying the rules slightly, and with a little bit of creativity, facilitators can make the game more fun and novel again. For example, by changing the game "A big wind blows" into "A small wind blows" (see Game 19), the game increases in difficulty and will also boost group members' participation. Consequently, if game facilitators are able to make variations and add new features to the games they already use, then they will never have to worry about running out of games or about group members getting tired of the same games.

Modify the game according to the venue and characteristics of group members

Game design should be modified based on multiple elements, as the same game may not be suitable for every venue or target audience (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2003). Indeed, even a slight modification of a game may lead to surprising results. For example, it may not be possible to play the game "Finding the spy" (see Game 43), which requires members of the group to divide into teams and stand side by side, in a small room with only enough space to sit instead of stand. However, the game can be modified so that group members divided into two teams can sit side by side and raise their hands up (instead of standing) or keep them down (instead of squatting). Such changes to a game will allow group members to participate more actively, which can be very exciting. This modified game would also make it more suitable for elderly group members with reduced mobility. Therefore, the game facilitator must remember to keep the venue size and layout as well as the characteristics of group members in mind when choosing games.

Consider when to combine different games

In addition to changing or modifying a game, as described in the sections above, one of the best ways to alter or create a game is to combine two games into one. This method will not only add

novelty to the game, but it will also make group members more eager to play it. For example, the games "Who's the Leader" (see Game 22) and "Musical Chairs" can be combined. Apart from being fun to play, the combination also increases the difficulty and challenge of the game. In fact, many games, including those in Part II of this book, can work well together. Obviously, the game facilitator must also be adept at handling the increased complexity and confusion that can arise by combining two different games. Facilitators should pay extra attention to the overlap in briefing and rules between the games and ensure that all group members understand these changes. It is also important to continually encourage group members to try harder in the new game, which may be more difficult. Again, it is important for such changes to be made based on the venue and characteristics of the group.

Games should be arranged in a good order

To effectively engage group members in the games and to elevate the overall mood of the meeting, the game facilitator must be proficient at arranging the order of games. Proper game sequencing makes it easier for group members to keep up with the pace of the games, assists the facilitator in explaining the rules more clearly, and is an effective way to liven up the games.

One method is to arrange the games in order of increasing difficulty. This allows group members to learn each step of a simple game, then slowly add more complicated or exciting steps or rules. It also helps group members to gradually build confidence as it involves games that build upon each other in a fun atmosphere. For example, before playing the typical version of "Trust rocking" (see Game 77), a similar game can first be played in teams of three, thus allowing group members to fully understand the objective and rules before playing the game in one big circle.

Another method is to follow one game with another relevant game. Grouping relevant games together gives the group members a sense of completing the games in a fluid motion. For example, after playing the game "Finding the spy" (see Game 43),

which involves dividing the group members into two teams facing each other in parallel lines, the facilitator should consider playing the game "Spider and snake" (see Game 9), which uses a similar set up.

Involve group members in designing or changing a game's rules

The game facilitator should not be the only person responsible for designing or changing the games. Instead, group members should also be invited to discuss the choice of games as well as the general tips they have that help them play (Elias et al., 2012). Group members should be encouraged to give comments or suggestions to change the rules of a game and if they think the game fits the desired objective. Indeed, group members can also be consulted early on to determine the underlying objective of the meeting and the games. When group members are given the opportunity to design the game, the effectiveness of the games will be enhanced (Tate, 2008), as they will be more inclined to participate, and the game will better meet their needs. For example, after playing the game "Body rock, paper, scissors" (see Game 10), the facilitator should encourage the group members to customise a set of movements or even facial expressions to represent "rock, paper, scissors". This also gives group members a sense of ownership over the game and a stake in its success.

Under certain circumstances, facilitators can also invite the more active group members (especially those who proposed appropriate changes to the game) to lead the rest of the group to play the modified game (Lindsay & Lindsay, 2008). In such situations, the game facilitator does not have supreme authority in leading the games but should consider releasing some responsibility to be shared with the group members at appropriate times. Working together with them as partners, in addition to also playing the games with them, will make the game more fun and enhance the relationship between the facilitator and group members. It will also help better match the games with group members' interests and the underlying objectives of the meeting. When playing games geared towards team building, allowing group members to set

challenges or targets by themselves, such as to complete a task within a certain time period, can ignite the group members' desire to participate more in the game as well as in non-game activities. The game facilitator should, therefore, create the appropriate atmosphere to unleash and make use of the creativity and abilities of the group members, so that they can have an opportunity to maximise their potential and contribute to the group's success.

serve, and clearly identify the objectives of the activity before choosing the most suitable game. In addition, the game facilitator should explore the fun side of the games, cultivate joy when playing the games, and be willing to share their feelings about the games with the group members. Most importantly, facilitators must constantly remind themselves to be flexible in the face of changing circumstances. They should learn how to modify games in a flexible manner, combine different games, arrange games in a proper sequence, and frequently exchange views with other group members. Since games are activities that require group members to participate and experience, the facilitator must try to remember these key concepts of "experiential learning". Besides accumulating more experience, facilitators and group members should also constantly reflect and observe the process and outcomes of the game (Chung, 2002). Doing so will be helpful to improve the games as well as the facilitator's leadership skills.

Conclusion

The use of games is an essential group facilitation skill. Proper use of games can encourage group members' participation, help achieve group activity objectives, promote team development, and make the team feel more lively, energetic, and motivated. However, for games to be successful, the game facilitator should master the key elements of leading games, understand the functions that games

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