

Facilitation of Square Wheels®

Building Collaboration and Creative Problem Solving Skills

A Leader's Guide to Facilitating and Motivating

by Dr. Scott J. Simmerman

There are many tools and approaches to building leadership and involvement skills for team facilitators. This is a general discussion of a basic approach with a focus on communications and involvement. And while the focus is on general skills for generating active involvement, it will be structured to support one specific tool, an illustration that we have used with people worldwide for the past 7 years and one proven to work well in a wide variety of situations. The illustration is known as **Square Wheels One**.

The goal of this booklet is to provide a practical and pragmatic approach to engaging and enlisting team facilitators, team leaders, and team members in performance improvement. And while this approach is specific, the skills learned inductively as this program is facilitated (listening, discussion, reframing, summarizing and prioritizing) are easily transferred to other leadership opportunities.

Please note that our website provides a large number of related illustrations and that there are a number of other articles and links to other websites that offer free as well as inexpensive tools, exercises, and other resources. The location is www.SquareWheels.com and we welcome your visits.

Organizational change efforts that focus on participative involvement, process improvement and customer relations are most successful when they promote learning throughout the entire organization. And by improving the work process, companies can lower costs, use time more efficiently and generally satisfy their customers more effectively. Yet for this to work, employees and their managers need to be involved in the process from start to finish.

Why use illustrations as organizational improvement tools?

Drawings are simple, useful and effective ways to create lasting impact. They stimulate and engage participants. They are memorable and produce rapid individual involvement and understanding. And they link to how adults learn.

Some realities about adult learning:

- It is easier to learn in a non-judgmental, non-threatening environment
- Learning is more effective when actively engaged and participating
- Learning is multi-modal, involving feelings, thoughts and visions
- Peer support and shared experiences are powerful anchors for change
- Mistakes and errors are powerful motivators for learning and these can be seen and discussed in the illustrations as opposed to criticizing the people about their actual work. It deflects the problems.

Why should managers be facilitators?

One of the continuing themes we have stressed is the importance of facilitation skills by managers. There are many positive impacts when managers get directly involved in coaching and facilitation efforts. The most common benefits include:

- Managers improve and practice leadership and coaching skills
- A stronger partnership is created among those involved
- Credibility and believability increase and people will be more open to trust leadership in the improvement effort.
- Teams and support structures can be defined / action plans more easily implemented and adjusted
- Managers share their ideas about expectations, objectives, and impacts
- Managers gain more commitment to implement and followup on plans
- People are more supportive of the training when their input is used to generate solutions and solve problems
- Managers develop active ownership for results
- Managers will actively manage perceived and actual roadblocks
- Projects get started immediately and you speed implementation
- Managers have the technical expertise, job knowledge and skills
- Managers understand what's good about company culture, strengths and shortcomings
- Managers generate involvement in the design, planning and implementation -- it is done with them rather than to them and more easily accepted as a result
- Managers can answer complex questions and details of implementation
- Managers can tell stories and give real examples and successes from within
- Companies can't afford to always use internal trainers from corporate staffs
 - They generally don't know how things really work
 - They generally cannot assist in long-term improvement projects
 - They don't always have credibility with the people
 - They don't have ownership of the processes
- Companies can't afford external consultants
 - They don't know your business and how things really work
 - They bring skills that have worked in other organizations and may not work in your situation and environment
 - They are often too costly to use on an ongoing basis

Training versus Facilitation

Training is not generally the best solution for addressing performance issues in the workplace and often fails to generate anticipated results. Some of the reasons that facilitation is better than training might include:

- *Management must demonstrate Commitment*

In most organizations, there are important issues of trust and commitment.

In many cases, people get skeptical about new programs and initiatives, even though top management clearly states their support. Too often, this perception of support is not demonstrated over the long-term and thus people are much more apt to look for behaviors of the leadership rather than verbal statements.

By actively involving themselves in the facilitation efforts, they are much more clearly demonstrating their active involvement. If you can, structure the active involvement of more senior managers in your efforts, especially where there are significant perceived roadblocks or previous failures to implement change and improvement.

- *Training seems to be the fastest and easiest response*

Many managers don't have a repertoire of skills nor the tools to use with people or performance problems. Thus, they use training staff and send people to a class, letting training take care of it. Therefore, inappropriate trainees wind up in classes they probably don't need and without a real desire to learn and without the group dynamics to make the training effective.

- *Training must occur in the classroom*

There is not a common belief that training can occur on the job and that it can be very job-related and performance-driven. Only the manager can control the on-the-job consequences that support the training or skills building. And only managers are accountable for results.

- *Non-managers will often not address the high- or highest-priority needs of the organization and focus on results*

Only those with real involvement in the workplace issues (productivity, quality, service, and similar) can effectively and consistently implement activities that address organizational needs. Others without direct involvement on a very regular basis will simply miss the need and not make the correct linkages.

- *Trainers are not generally held accountable for achieving results*

Trainers often fail because there is not a process for their long-term, active involvement in generating results. They are not partners in your initiative and are often only responsible for conducting a satisfactory training event.

- *Facilitation must be focused on more than simply skills and behavior -- it must be focused on sustainable change and lasting improvement*

Behavior change is important, but it must also be supported by peer support, feedback on the job and a variety of other things natural to the workplace and unnatural to the classroom. Facilitation of participant-generated ideas gives one a greater likelihood to produce ongoing support and improvement.

- *Development and Delivery are much less important than group dynamics and the perception that leadership is interested*

Teams need support to get things done. And the support must come from their management.

Trainers are simply too busy to build the kind of intensive relationship with the work teams to guarantee successes. And if the trainer is viewed as too important to the process, then the people will wait until the trainer is available in order to move things forward.

- *Training tends to be too content-centered and not focused on workplace improvement, generating conflicts in terms of implementation*

Trainers often shift toward adding more topics, making materials more attractive and adding exercises to produce highly-rated sessions. Facilitation may not be "pretty" but it focuses much more on getting things done and generating change.

- *Training often does not support the creation of a "critical mass" needed to generate action*

Most training programs fail due to a lack of support by workers and supervisors -- the training fails to account for involvement, real linkage to worker-perceived issues or generate ownership involvement by those in the training. Facilitated sessions address this directly.

- *Follow-up is seldom done and the root of most failures*

What happens immediately after any training is more critical than what happens during a class -- there must be an immediate action in order for things to "stick." This is much more likely in the case of a facilitated discussion and with the direct and active involvement of the manager or team leader who is facilitating.

- *Many jobs are poorly designed or not well structured. Training cannot address those systemic issues very effectively.*

Active involvement by line management, a focus on the structural issues and a discussion of possibilities makes performance improvements more likely. Plus, it has been our experience that, "*The Round Wheels are already in the wagon,*" and that some people have already implemented "personal fixes" to correct some of these problematic structures and organizational roadblocks.

Recognize that any approach to problem-solving will be greatly influenced by the organization's culture as well as the cultural background of the participants. Another factor includes the participants' histories in regards to their personal experiences with innovation and improvement. There is seldom one particular approach that works in all situations. Properly structured, however, we have found **Square Wheels One** to work exceptionally well in a wide variety of situations worldwide.

The end result is that group dynamics will differ from culture to culture, potentially affecting your delivery. When working with multi-national groups, be more attentive to these dynamics.

Please note that there is a Roadblocks Management exercise included on the website and an article around "Dis-Un-Empowerment" that offers some effective and constructive ideas for better managing this dynamic.

Procedure for using **Square Wheels One** - some ideas and frameworks

Avoid lecture or "classroom style" facilitation where one person dominates the discussion. The best results occur when people discover key ideas through group discussions and take a viewpoint of increased objectivity and perspective.

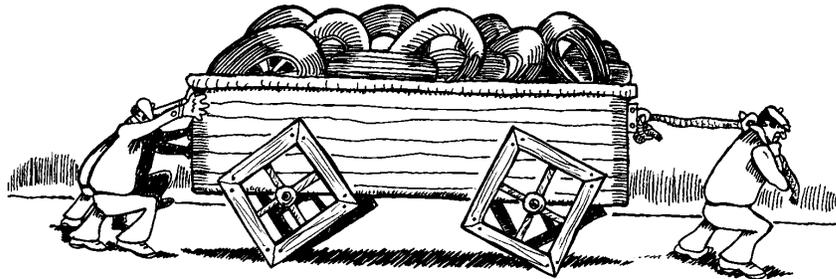
It has been our experience that you should not attempt to get closure on the ideas or implementation strategies in your first session; innovation and creativity take time to develop so let people play with the ideas first.

Round tables of 5 or 6 people seem to work best for generating a reasonable level of involvement by all of the people. By getting everyone involved, you gain the benefit of differing perspectives and thinking styles and generate some level of ownership by everyone.

Delivery is pretty simple and straightforward.

1. We introduce the illustration by saying, *"We have recently discovered a concept that illustrates many of the ways most organizations really operate..."* or something similar. Do not start with a statement such as *"Here's how your department works"* as this may put people on the defensive.

Then, show the transparency of **Square Wheels One**.



© Performance Management Company, 1993 Not for Reproduction.

2. Consider giving each person one copy of the **Square Wheels One** worksheet, which is optionally available off the webpage.
3. Say something like: *"Take a minute or so, working alone, to generate as many ideas as you can about this illustration and your reactions. Then, begin to discuss it with the people at your tabletop. Take about five minutes for this."*

In reality, give them enough time to generate a good deal of content or until you perceive the energy level of the group begin to wane. The goal is to let them discuss ideas, be actively involved and develop ownership.

4. After a few minutes, mention that you would like each group to select one person who will serve as *spokesperson* (you can laugh at this inside joke).
5. As they complete their tabletop discussions, have each group share their thoughts and ideas about the illustration. Responses will be quite varied and many will be humorous. Allow the group to have fun.

Use watercolor marker pen(s) and write directly on a clear overlay on the transparency to capture ideas, circling and highlighting major ideas and key points of the illustration as they are mentioned. As an alternative, capture ideas on easel pad paper and post.

Some probable responses are detailed in a section below.

6. Summarize the discussion and make any key points you would like about the general theme of your discussion, talking about things that work but can be improved and the *Round Wheels* that already exist within the wagon. It is not about inventing new wheels, in many cases, but simply identifying best practices among the people in the organization.
7. Have the tabletops now discuss some of the possible **Square Wheels** that may operate within the organization.
8. Have the groups select a few of these **Square Wheels** (maybe one per table) and have them generate a list of potential *Round Wheel* solutions to them.
9. Discuss what the tabletops might be able to do to test and/or implement a round wheel solution. Recognize that the best approach to implementing one of these solutions will often parallel the successful implementation of another idea in the past. At this point, which may not be in the same session as the other discussions, you can allow the group to focus on action plans for improvement.

Session Overview

The goal of your discussion is to identify as many of the factors and key points as your group can.

By taking the time in this initial step, you are transferring ownership to participants -- they apply their views and creativity to the theme, engage each other in the discovery process itself, and use the diversity of ideas and perspective to generate a much better set of ideas and reactions to the cartoon than would be possible working in isolation. This can be one of your debriefing themes and learning outcomes.

We have thus far identified over 200 discussion points about the illustration, an obvious indicator that there are many creative possibilities. We've also found that it is quite easy for managers and team leaders to use and to interject a bit of fun into the workplace!

Once they have shared their ideas, you should summarize and then provide anchor points to your key themes for the session. Recognize (and reinforce) the similarities and differences in thinking among the group.

In your review, you will probably want to include links to what might be represented by:

- the person in front
- the people in back
- the body of the wagon
- the rope
- the **square wheels**
- the *round wheels*

Consider your own beliefs and perceptions about how things work and add them based on the main themes of the discussion.

Your debriefing points might include:

The person in front represents leadership, top and middle management or others focused forward (and seldom backward). Leaders get insulated by their rope to the bumps and thumps of many realities of the journey forward. They work hard to pull the organization ahead.

And a rope may be so long that the leaders lose touch with what actually happens. After all, *"A Desk is a Dangerous Place from which to View the World."* Leaders can implement bad changes with good intentions; most leaders *do* have good intentions but little current "hands-on reality."

The people in back - represent the front-line employees and supervisors who cannot see far ahead and feel every bump and pothole in the road. They push but have to trust the leadership to steer the course of the journey. They have no "big picture" of where the organization (the wagon) is headed, but work hard to do what is expected of them. They lack perspective and vision. Intentions are positive.

The body of the wagon - The body itself is well made and sturdy, much like the basic core of any organization. It will do the job for which it was designed. Its nature makes changing direction quite difficult, but it works like it always has. New wagons are also quite expensive!

The **Square Wheels** - These represent the traditions of the organization, the way things have always been done, the old ways, the systems and procedures to respond to quality and service initiatives or other issues of relevance to the group. In some organizations, they might represent inter-departmental conflicts and the common experience of an organization that does not move smoothly forward.

The *Round Wheels* - These represent new ideas for innovation or improvement, generally coming from within the organization itself. *Round Wheels* already exist in the wagon and are used by the exemplary performers!

Overall, the visions are difficult to effectively communicate to everyone in the work group and continued motivation is necessary to keep pushing forward. People generally trust leadership to lead the journey. But after pushing for a long time, people in the back may lose interest in where the organization is going or needs to go and can become resigned to the fact that the **Square Wheels** are a way of life. The organization clunks along, and everyone knows it.

What key points can be made in these discussions?

People front and back work hard at moving forward, although the demotivated ones may not put forth all of their effort. Leadership can appear out of touch with the wagon and its people and may not see innovative ideas for or feel the need for change. Systems and procedures can be less than optimal even though they work.

Teams should also discuss the paradox of the **Square Wheels**: they do work and they will allow the team to meet current goals and objectives, but there is less and less time to stop pulling because the goals will increase each year.

And as the wagon keeps rolling forward, no one can take the time to step back and look for improvements in the way things are done. Getting people to stop their wagon for a few hours and discuss the systems and procedures would probably

lead to improvements and innovation. But the challenge is always around this issue of *continuous* continuous improvement. Recognize that they probably used an even less effective approach before they implemented **Square Wheels!**

The reality is that even those processes that work well today must be improved in the future as technology changes and competitive shifts occur. And the processes that work smoothly today will not all work so smoothly tomorrow.

Close with the point that leadership must share vision about the journey. The view from the front of the wagon is much different than the view from the back (we use the theme of "Boards and Hands"). The issues of shared missions and visions is important from the aspect of motivating people and engaging them in the journey forward. You can thus use this simple metaphor to link to your leadership and communications courses.

Another key point is that the *Round Wheel* ideas are already in the wagon -- *they already exist*. We have consistently found that there are very good and generally proven ideas already in existence. Improvements don't depend on *inventing* new ideas as much as *soliciting* Best Practices from the exemplary performers in the organization. These people have already implemented better practices - they help them perform better.

On Implementation

The critical success factor in any improvement effort is implementation -- how will the efforts be structured so that they are effective in generating change. As we shared previously, by facilitating a session with the cartoon, you are generating clearer understanding about the issues and opportunities, gathering ideas about solutions, and generating momentum for improvement as well as ownership of the process. "Nobody ever washes a rental car!"

Overall, I believe in biological principles of organizational development and think that they apply nicely to issues of facilitation, change and improvement. One principle that sticks out for me is:

Ontogeny Recapitulates Phylogeny.

Essentially, this is a train of thought in biology that the new successful individual (the embryo) of a species parallels the evolutionary / embryological growth of the older successful individuals of the species.

Applied to organizations, this gives us the rocket science thought that the new programs being implemented in organizations that are successful tend to mirror the development of the older programs that were successful. This generally allows for environmental, cultural, situational, and other factors and can even include the thinking of Kubler-Ross on the stages of death and dying!

You're safer and probably more likely to succeed if you can identify the critical success factors from previously successful implementations before you go forward. Try to understand how things worked best in the past in your

organization and model as many of them as possible. There are no "silver bullet" solutions that will work everywhere. Think about this as Organizational Biology 101 - "Introduction to Successful Development!"

With that said, we'll share some ideas for facilitation, engagement and implementation that might fit with your organization's pattern of development.

Typical Project Implementation / Learning Process Flow

1. The facilitator presents the framework of a problem to potential active participants, working with them in small teams. Again, we suggest implementation teams of 5 to 7 people. Larger groups have the tendency to become committees and work by consensus, giving rise to lower overall expectations and goals. And expect that not all people will want to be involved. Some people will choose to be observers until they are less unsure as to process and consequences.
2. The team defines and refines their understanding of the problem or opportunity and then plays with their ideas. The viewers generate perspective, nuances and a variety of ideas. Creativity and innovation lead to various potential options.

Allow team members to discover the importance of individual thinking and contributions within a team environment. Diversity of perspective and independent thinking are quite valuable and generate much better outcomes.

3. Viewers become participants as they gain a level of ownership and active involvement. Success or failure is de-emphasized -- the process of engagement and enlistment is the focus. People most naturally focus on success - it is a general mental framework. (see our list of motivating and demotivation factors below)
4. Ideas are implemented and tested. Results are measured. Ongoing feedback is provided.
5. Establish a clear contract with the group concerning the initiative and the debriefing objectives and the program of improvement rolls forward. Be specific about how the followup will be conducted and get an agreement on timing and goals.
6. Recognize the successes. Support any failures and learning opportunities.
7. Repeat.

On completion of the initiative, Step 6, the facilitator leads debriefing session focused on recognizing the efforts and any successes. Continuous learning should occur with the discussion focused on positive impacts, results, learning, and generalizing applications and new opportunities for learning and improvement across the organization. Any failure should be viewed as a success because the group will learn from it.

This is *different* from the **6 Phases of a Typical Project Management Approach:**

Enthusiasm
Disillusionment
Panic
Search for the Guilty
Punishment of the Innocent
Praise and Honor for the Non-Participants

A positive focus on improvement and learning create a climate of success and an opportunity for support for new initiatives. Conversely, a "search for the guilty" will decrease the likelihood of new initiatives being discussed and implemented.

As the teams become more skilled, the nature and type of project can be more involved and more difficult to implement. Try to initially focus on rather simple and easy to achieve objectives rather than starting on the most difficult ones.

Some facilitation language:

Your goal, as facilitator, is to engage thinking and creativity. We've provided some specific ideas about how to use **Square Wheels One** previously. Here are some other thoughts on engaging creative thinking:

- Triggers generate transitional thinking. A trigger might be using the same word or idea thought: *"What might be a similar example?"*
- Questioning generates thought and the expression of ideas - *"How many of you?"*
- Flashback - *"Does anyone remember when we ...?"*
- Point-By-Point - *"Let's identify three main ideas from this ...The first one is.. The second one might be... etc."*
- Reframing - *"That is a good example of this as a problem. How might the same thing be of benefit?"*
- Physical Movements and Activity - The facilitator should move or change location or move people around the room. This is best done when changing to a new ideas or thoughts. The facilitator can also set up one corner of the room for problem definition and discussion and an opposite corner for discussion of ideas and potential solutions. Move people around.
- Location - You might select one corner for "No Interruptions." Allow people to escape to that location when they need some time to think without interruption. No one is allowed to talk to people when they are there.

Additional Background and Details

Using **Square Wheels** also changes the language of performance, and thus works subliminally to impact long-term development. This metaphor also works to generate an Action Learning - type perspective and objectivity and is a much better interactive alternative to traditional lecture techniques for team facilitation, communications and leadership development.

The approach deliberately allows for people to learn by working with each other on real-world workplace issues, creating an environment conducive to group and individual learning. You might also choose to engage an external adviser from training or elsewhere should you want to try to generate an outside perspective and assist in the followup efforts. This does not mean that you do not have to take a less active role in the process.

Note that:

- learning takes place by grappling with tasks, with and from a group of others who are also engaged in managing real problems
- members of the group retain responsibility for solving their own problems, by contrast with project teams or task forces
- the group is concerned with implementing the issues explored. They are not simply seeking theoretical solutions to problems or passing on recommendations
- the approach is not a "correct-all bandaid." It does not guarantee success but it ensures that the prerequisite conditions for learning will be there.

We do not prescribe that any particular solutions are the best, nor do we insure that a most appropriate fix will result. A facilitated group process will more naturally lead to one or more solutions that the teams will consider implementing. Participants learn to solve problems and address opportunities by asking the right questions in a directed way, rather than by trying to impose favored solutions.

The suggestion is to provide an environment where learning and discussion are fully integrated with work: periods of action alternating with periods of reflection and discussion, all in basic alignment with the desired end results of continuous organizational improvement.

The process is not about theoretical knowledge gained from the classroom -- it is about practical knowledge taken from the experiences and thinking of others in your workplace. It is about insight and perspective, reflection and analysis, with only the cartoon as the training materials and only the skills and positive intentions of the people involved as the basis of knowledge and initiative. Lending expertise remains incidental and learning from each other remains key.

The approach has proven to be practical in a wide variety of organizations and cultures: Translating newly shared insights and perspectives into practical improvement is a natural part of the process. And while the approach can be "taught" quickly, one should expect continuing use of the thinking patterns and group dynamics over time.

Points about cultural differences in learning from a North American perspective:

- North Americans value "realistic pragmatism." Most solutions that work are good ones (other cultures are often more ideological and more anchored in issues of face and status).
- North Americans are very egalitarian; anyone in the workplace may have the answers and ideas. In some cultures, things are more hierarchical and structured -- only experts or those with status will have "good ideas."
- North Americans have a "can-do" attitude; most believe that we can and should tackle all problems and that we can influence the future. In other cultures, many may be more fatalistic in their attitudes.
- North Americans believe that an idea can be critiqued independently of the person who proposed it. In many other cultures, especially in Asian countries, most believe that criticism cannot be depersonalized and that to discuss one person's idea in a negative way may result in a loss of face. Group process may differ.

- North Americans, for the most part, are quite tolerant of ambiguity, realizing that there may be many possible answers and solutions. In some other cultures, there is an expectation that there can only be one right answer and the Expert or person of status will tell us what that is.

Leadership Traits

There are five basic practices that come from extensive research on leadership. The linkages to the **Square Wheels** materials and our approach to involving people should be quite obvious and straightforward, since the cartoons are designed to be used to engage and enlist people in improvement and change efforts. These leaderships traits include:

Challenging the Process - It's about searching for the opportunities to improve the way things work and includes a wide variety of tactics and strategies. Effective leaders are more willing to allow discussion, experimentation and risk-taking and more willing to tolerate mistakes in the long-term quest for improvement. Inevitable disappointments are merely bumps in the road of organizational learning. Teams will freely identify the **Square Wheels** of how things work.

Inspiring a Shared Vision - Effective leaders work to engage, enlist and involve people in creating an ideal version of how things can be and what might be accomplished. It's about creating opportunities and possibilities and developing a sense of group and can be accomplished by sharing the View From the Front with the people at the back.

Enabling Actions - Leaders foster collaboration and build supporting teams, actively involving people in perceived opportunities. There is a focus on mutual respect and sustaining extraordinary effort and creating an atmosphere of trust and human dignity; it's about building human capital and self-esteem as well as testing new ideas and other *Round Wheels*.

Modeling and Facilitating - Leaders, by example, establish a style of dealing with people and create standards of excellence for how goals should be pursued. They are effective Mud Managers and clearly understand the need for interim, step-by-step goals that people can achieve in the quest for long-term *continuous* continuous improvement. Leadership progresses by behavioral example.

Encouraging the Heart - Excellent leaders recognize that individual contributions are critical and that continuous improvement is a continuous process accomplished because people want to improve things. Rewards must be shared and individuals and teams recognized for their efforts. They make people feel like heroes and heroines in their daily work.

adapted from Jim Kuoze and Barry Posner

Note: Performance Management Company retains all rights to the concept and illustrations and requires that the **Square Wheels One** illustration not be duplicated. Copyright and servicemark must be respected. Your organization will need prior written permission to use this illustration in any other form or format such as newsletters or other communications.

Square Wheels® is a registered servicemark of Performance Management Company and all materials are © Performance Management Company, 1992-1999. All Rights Reserved.