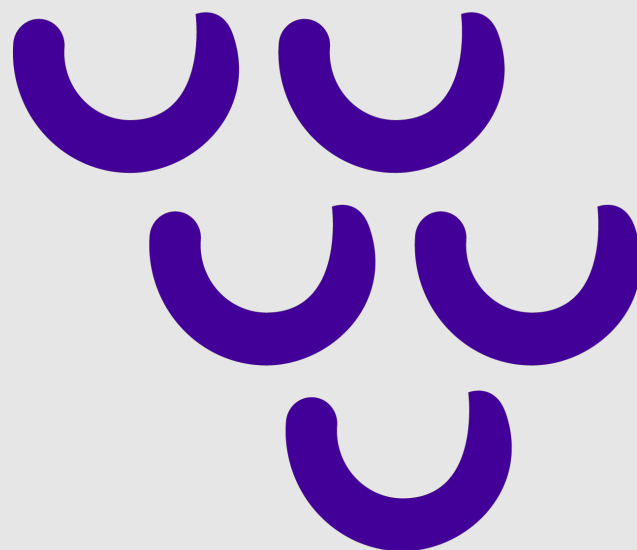




GRAPE PEOPLE GUIDEBOOK

The Eight Key Competencies of Facilitators

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A guidebook brought to you by Grape People

By Andrew Ullom

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Introduction: What makes a good facilitator?

Facilitators are a hot commodity. They are in demand, and rightfully so. A good facilitator can work with a group to produce results that exceed the sum of the group's parts. A facilitator clarifies murky topics and unites a group towards a singular cause. If you have taken the time to procure this guidebook and are willing to invest your valuable time in reading it, then you probably have some lofty expectations of the benefits that facilitation can do for you, too. But how do facilitators do what they do? Well, tools are a large part of it. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of group tools that a facilitator uses to clarify topics, unite people, and focus groups on completing set objectives. Tools help, but there is more to a successful facilitator than simply their tools. In my years working with the fantastic Grape People Team, I have seen used time and time again a set of eight key competencies that facilitators use as a foundation for all that they do. Grape People even uses these eight competencies to measure how well facilitators do – they make up a large part of the facilitator's certification exam. Potential facilitators need to understand and apply all eight key competencies to become certified by Grape People as a facilitator.

Here are all eight competencies listed in the table below:

1. The leader's neutral role

- The leader is content neutral and does not show personal preference, nor group, or edit the ideas created during the workshop

2. Workshop stages

- The leader uses a clear and logical workshop process

3. Tools for creating and choosing ideas

- The leader knows an adequate number of tools and how to choose the right tools to use to meet the needs of the group and complete the workshop objectives

4. Psychological Safety

- The leader is transparent and clearly explains the goal, schedule, instructions, and roles
- The leader is friendly
- The leader connects participants

5. Creating alignment (dealing with the content)

- Balancing individual, small-group, and large-group activities
- Giving importance to both emergence and convergence

6. Visualising

- Visualising the group's ideas to help decision making
- Workshop schedule, workshop goals, and instructions are written down and displayed

7. Presence

- The leader observes and listens to the group and intervenes actively when the group is stuck.

8. Reaching the Goal

- Objectives of the workshop are reached on time
- If targets are not reached, the leader and the group discuss why. A plan on how to proceed and meet the objectives is made
- The outcome is evaluated against the objectives

These competencies vary. Some of them, like choosing the right tools and correctly designing workshops, require a pedagogical understanding of facilitative methods. They can be taught and applied with practice. Other key competencies, like presence, are a bit more abstract. They are not learned in a book as much as they are practised. Presence is not about applying tools but carrying yourself in such a way that people know they can count on you to help. A good presence makes people want to follow a leader and work hard for them.

I've worked with the Grape People Team for nearly a decade to produce learning materials and write books and eBooks. When I first teamed up with Grape, my knowledge of facilitation was next to zero. Still, over the years, I have been fortunate to sit in on

workshops, training events, and certification assessments. I've had hours of discussions about group tools, workshop design, and what makes a good facilitator. I first wrote about these critical competencies in the book, *Handbook of Professional Facilitation: Theory, Tools and Design*, which Grape People Founder and Facilitator all-star Pepe Nummi authored. And I want to write a bit more about these eight competencies in this guidebook. I believe these competencies are valuable for both novice and experienced facilitators.

For a novice, they provide a good base of what facilitators and group leaders need to do to lead groups effectively. More experienced facilitators may already be aware of these competencies, but it is a good checklist for them to review when reflecting on a session. If you are already a facilitator or experienced group leader, are you embodying these eight traits in your work? Can you honestly say that you are actively demonstrating all eight of these key competencies in every one of your sessions? Odds are, you might need to refresh yourself on a few of them and recommit to a few. In the following pages, I will dive into each of the eight key competencies of successful facilitators and show how you can apply them to your work immediately.

1. Neutral role

An experienced facilitator always tries to be 100% content neutral. This means that the facilitator does not show any preference for the group's ideas. A content-neutral facilitator also does not feed people answers if they are stuck. This can be difficult. If you are leading a group, you want things to go well, and it might feel uncomfortable if people get stuck at a certain point. Even if it feels clumsy and you have a helpful solution on the tip of your tongue to give to the group, resist the temptation to jump in with a helpful answer. It is a harmful shortcut to try and ensure success by providing hints or suggesting ideas to the group. Your suggestions are probably going to complicate the group decision-making process. Instead, focus on leading the group process and making sure that the meeting or workshop runs smoothly. Remaining neutral implies not pushing for any specific outcome, even if you are invested in the results.

Be neutral

- The leader is content neutral and does not favor some ideas over others. They do not group, censor, or edit the ideas created during the workshop.



When I began working with Grape People and started to learn about Facilitation, Pepe Nummi, one of the founders of Grape People, told me about the importance of remaining neutral. He mentioned to me that The International Association of Facilitators considers neutrality the most important competence for professional facilitators. I was surprised by this. I thought the key would be a mastery of tools or a Master's Degree in Business Pedagogy, but I was wrong. Pepe continued explaining the importance of neutrality and discussed a time when he attended the European Conference of Facilitation in Portoroz, Slovenia. Pepe was a part of a group of nine people trying to pass a facilitation certification test. The group was a mix of trainers, coaches, managers, and consultants. Five passed the test, and four did not. Pepe explained that the four people that did not pass were all consultants. What about the consultants caused them to fail while the rest succeeded? Consultants are just as capable as everyone else, but the nature of their role as consultants makes it very difficult to remain neutral.

What is your daily role? Are you already working in a position where you have to practice being neutral to content or possible outcomes? Or is being content-neutral something new to you? It is good to start speculating how this core facilitation competency aligns with your existing habits and ways of working.

It might be difficult sometimes to remain neutral and resist the temptation to help someone by giving them an answer or pushing them in the direction you want them to go. Remain neutral, even if people directly ask you what they should do. If someone asks for your opinion about a challenging situation, you can acknowledge that it is difficult but do not suggest what to do. Let people know you understand that it is difficult, but at the same time, give the group complete decision-making control.

As Pepe's story about the consultants showed, some people may find it challenging to be content-neutral. But begin practising right away – it is no accident that this is the first key competency covered in this guidebook. Being 100% content neutral is something every good facilitator always has in mind.

The leader as a neutral party

Groups will ask you for your thoughts and opinions when they are stuck. It is important in these moments to deflect their questions back to the group quickly. Acknowledge that the situation is difficult and ask a question to get them thinking:



- **Damn, this is quite the challenge. What do you think should happen next?**
- **Wow, I can see why this is a struggle. Can you think of any solutions?**
- **This is a tricky topic. Do you have any other ideas or can you try thinking about this in a new way?**
- **Hmm, what a situation. What do you think you should do?**

The phrases above are just examples. The key is to show you understand the issue (empathise) while at the same time deflecting the issue/topic/question back to the group so that you remain neutral.

2. Choosing the correct stages for the workshop

Another competency of great facilitators is correctly structuring meetings and workshops. When a meeting has clear stages, people perform better. If you link the workshop stages logically, the tools and methods will be more effective. On the other hand, nothing will work well if the facilitator tries to lead a poorly-structured workshop.

The three-stage CSA process for workshop design is a common workshop structure. CSA is short for clarifying, solutions, and action. Each stage has unique tools and a specific purpose.

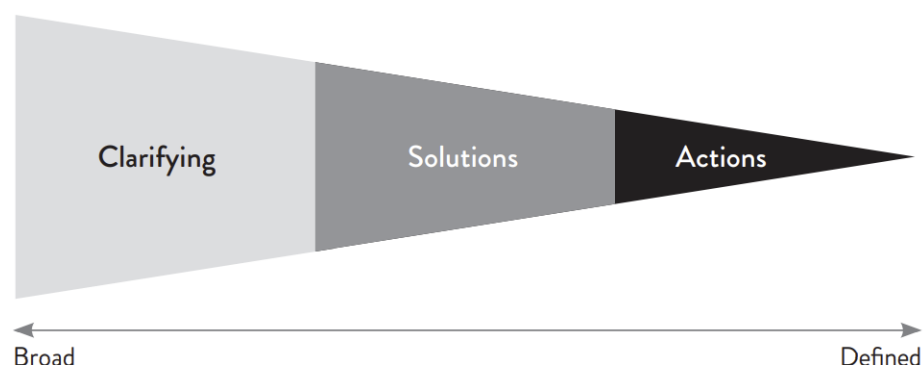
The CSA structure



The clarifying stage is where a group determines where their focus should be and what questions need to be answered. This stage clearly defines the subject matter and ensures that everyone has a common understanding of the issue. Doing this allows people to be more in synch and have more common ground in the later stages of a workshop. If you do this stage well, it tends to be easy to agree on solutions—they arise spontaneously.

The solutions stage is finding alternatives and answers to these questions, and the action stage is where concrete actions are outlined and committed to. The key difference between the solutions and action stages is that solutions are broader, while actions are the specific tasks that a person will undertake to achieve a solution. The solutions and action stages of the workshop may seem very similar to one another, but both are very important because each of them serves crucial and distinct roles in effective workshops.

As a workshop progresses through the CSA stages, the content goes from general to very specific



The time given to each stage and the tools you will use for clarifying, solutions and action stages depend on the specific aims of the workshop and the topics the facilitator is working with. However, a simple way to look at the stages of CSA is that each stage focuses on a specific question, or questions. The particular order of the stages and the unique focus of each stage make the entire CSA structure so effective.

Instructions for each part of CSA

CLARIFYING	SOLUTIONS	ACTION
Clarifying a goal: • What are our goals? • Which goals should we reach in next three years? Clarifying a problem: • What is our problem? • Which problem should we solve today?	• What are the solutions? • Which solutions do we want to implement?	• What do I do? - Which actions do we need to develop and how?

Each workshop stage should also make time for emergent and convergent thinking. If you are not sure what emergent and convergent thinking are, or what tools promote these types of thinking, don't worry. The third key competency will expand on this.

3. Choosing the right emergent and convergent tools

To be a great leader, you need to know how to use quite a few different group tools, and you also will need to know when to apply them. By having a wide selection in your toolbox, you can design workshops that fit varying time constraints and objectives.

Divergent and convergent thinking

Creative thinking can be divided into two very different modes: divergent and convergent thinking. Both are needed for effective creativity. Divergent thinking is essential for creating new ideas and convergent thinking is needed for analysing the practicality of an idea.



Facilitators must account for emergent and convergent thinking in their workshops and select tools accordingly. Simply put, use tools that help people create ideas (emergence) and tools that help people choose the best ideas (convergence).

Emergence always comes before convergence. This order is always the same. The group leader can use their understanding of emergence and convergence to choose the right tools and modify the workshop plan as needed. Depending on the group's needs, the facilitator may want to spend more time on emergence or perhaps more time on convergence. They may decide that equal time for each mode is best. If the priority is creativity and understanding of ideas, then give more time to emergence. If a strong commitment to ideas is most important, spend more time using convergent tools. The group leader needs to understand each of these phases and their purpose for planning effective group decision-making processes.

Emergence is the phase where people share their ideas, logic and assumptions with each other; ideas gain acceptance (or die) and ideas are combined to create breakthroughs.

Emergence is difficult. Do you remember the last time you came up with an idea you were proud of? You probably felt a rush of enthusiasm and were keen on telling everyone all about it. The last thing you were interested in was putting your idea on pause to listen to someone else tell you about their idea instead. Getting people to listen to each other enthusiastically while not becoming frustrated or impatient is the challenge during emergence. A facilitator can make this challenge much more manageable by giving time for individual thinking, discussion in small groups, and providing clear instructions and support throughout the entire process. Effective emergence begins with connecting the individual with their own thinking. People need time to gather their thoughts and clarify their own thinking before they are ready to share with other people. This is where many ideas are created at once. The most effective tactics are to give ample time for individual thinking and give plenty of encouragement to the group. Instruct the group to write down ideas and thoughts silently for a few minutes before continuing with the session. If anyone seems to be having a hard time, you can jump in with more instructions or some friendly motivational words to keep them on track and creating ideas.

We will not review any specific tools now, but some examples of emergent tools include Force Field Analysis and Idealogue.

If you notice that some participants are stuck, do not push them. As long as some ideas have been produced, they are ready for the rest of the emergent-convergent process.

Convergence is the phase where people compare ideas and make a choice.

As the meeting shifts from emergence to convergence, the energy within the group also changes, and the new question invigorates the participants. During emergence, the issue is

to understand the idea. During convergence, the focus is to decide which idea to implement. This transforms the ideas into competitors. It is one thing to understand an idea, but it is different when people are explicitly instructed to choose the best idea. The ideas are now competing with each other, which forces more discussion about the framework behind an idea. Some group leaders may use fixed criteria here and give specific instructions or parameters to the group, but I usually do not. Trying to impose fixed criteria tends to be an oversimplification. Instead, I prefer to rely on group discussion when ideas need to be chosen and simple voting tools when it comes time to visualise the priorities.

Some examples of convergent tools include Idealogue (this tool is both emergent and convergent) and Dot Voting. There are many tools to choose from, so where do you begin? We can simplify things by categorising workshop tools into three different types; basic tools, communication tools, and tools that deal with complexity. Basic tools are used when the situation is straightforward—one key question or topic, and a group of participants that are neutral to change and each other. These tools are most often used during the clarifying stage of a workshop, where there is one question/goal to clarify. Communication tools take things a bit further and force participants into the emergent zone, where the logic and framework behind other ideas are analysed. Idealogue and Bus Stop are two examples.

Tools that deal with complexity are those that help understand complicated situations or social conflicts. Think about Dynamic Facilitation, where the group shares their thoughts and concerns while the group leader records the results. Some of these tools can handle multiple key questions simultaneously and are open-ended without many rules. Think about the Open Space Method, where people can come and go to topical meetings as they see fit.

More information on tool selection can be found in a great book by Pepe Nummi, *The Handbook of Professional Facilitation: Theory, Tools and Design*.

4. Creating a sense of psychological safety

One of the most notable things about attending a meeting or workshop with a competent leader is the sense of psychological safety during the session. People feel relaxed and engaged. The group leader helps people open up and participate in remarkable ways, which gives excellent results. It all starts with you, the group leader. Your job is to create psychological safety by connecting participants, being transparent, and having a friendly and attentive presence.

Create psychological safety

- The group leader is transparent and clearly explains the workshop goals, the agenda, the instructions, and participant roles
- The group leader is friendly and approachable
- The leader connects individuals together by giving time for conversations in pairs and small groups



First, let's talk about connecting participants. You want to do this early on, so it is best to work towards this at the beginning of the workshop during the check-in stage. The way to do this is to have people talk in pairs. Pair discussion is less intimidating than talking in larger groups, and no one can hide to avoid talking when in pairs. This one-on-one discussion links the individual with another person and eliminates nerves. As people respond to your questions (which can be light-hearted), they build confidence talking with their partners. The pair discussions connect individuals with someone else, which makes everyone feel good. You also must remain transparent to inspire trust in the group and make participants feel comfortable. The primary way to be transparent is to clearly explain the aim of each stage and the way of working. Tell everyone what they will do, why, their expected roles, your role, and the duration of the activity. This makes tasks seem manageable and helps people understand the purpose of each activity and why they should participate. Group activities that do not have a clear objective can feel like a waste of time.

Be Transparent

- Clearly share the objectives for the workshop or session
- Explain how you will guide the group towards these objectives (ways of working, not tool name or method)
- Share expectations (time allotted for work, active participation, etc.)
- If the workshop is not going well, address it and ask for feedback from the group to find out why
- Frequently ask the group if there are questions or feedback



Let me tell you about a trip to the dentist that shows how important it is to be transparent. For starters, I hate going to the dentist. To make matters worse, I was visiting a new dentist. I was looking for an excuse to jump out of that chair and leave. I almost did exactly that when I saw that the dentist had picked up an oversized angry-looking drill in her hand. But before I could make a break for it, she said, "OK, I am going to use this drill to clean your teeth. The entire cleaning will take about five minutes. I will drill for about thirty seconds and then stop to vacuum excess water from your mouth. If you are in pain, raise your hand in the air, and I will stop." Her explanation of the cleaning process completely erased my fears; I knew what the dentist would do, why she had to do it, and how long it would take. I also had a sense of control; I could raise my hand to give feedback on the process as it was happening, so I was not worried about being stuck in an uncomfortable position. Give your participants the same sense of safety by explaining your processes and the tools you are using.

You do not need to have a specific type of personality to be a facilitator. I've met introverts and extroverts who both do an excellent job. There are many ways that you can get the job done. For example, some facilitators like to tell silly jokes and even make fun of themselves. This sets a relaxed tone and gets everyone in the right mindset for the work ahead.

Other facilitators would never dream of telling jokes. Instead, they opt for a more professional approach. Either way is acceptable. But one needed constant is to be friendly and respectful. You lead by example. The tone you set will be mirrored by the groups you lead.

5. Creating alignment on content

A facilitator is required to make sure that everyone is on the same page. Nothing will work if people understand the meeting's content or the point of an activity differently. After all, a facilitator is the group's leader. They are there to guide the group towards its goals. I see this role as someone who creates alignment. Think about it. When clients request a workshop, they want a people-based solution, an agreement between the participants. They want their employees to work together towards the common good! They hope a workshop can get people to agree to move forward with a new strategy or policy, solve a conflict, or create new ideas they would achieve as a team. These different examples are all forms of alignment, and as the group leader, it is your job to create alignment. Many facilitators I have met over the years say that creating alignment and shared understanding is the most difficult of the eight competencies.

Create alignment

- Use individual, small-group, and full-group communication
- Invest enough time for both emergence and convergence



Alignment means that everyone is pointed in the same direction towards shared goals. There is a unified, understood purpose within the group. A facilitator creates alignment by balancing discussion and group activities so that these three categories are present: individual, small group, and the whole group. This structure is a common one called Me/We/Us. Me/We/Us is a structure that starts with time for individual work, moves to time in pairs or small groups, and closes with the entire group working together.

Me/We/Us: A tool for getting everyone involved

1. Me

- Writing down ideas individually



2. We

- Ideas are refined in pairs or small groups
- Choosing the best ideas



3. Us

- Sharing the ideas with the whole group
- Collect and display the ideas so everyone can see them and review together



All three stages of Me/We/Us create a group atmosphere where everyone is comfortable participating. Me allows time for introverts to gather their thoughts and formulate ideas. We is the platform to share these ideas. It helps people get deeper into their ideas and provides psychological safety for sharing their thoughts. People explain the reasoning behind their ideas as they discuss them in small groups. The number of ideas decreases as people merge or create new breakthroughs built off the content created during the individual (Me) stage. Finally comes Us, a platform for informing others. During the Us section, ideas are shared but usually not developed further. This structure, with multiple stages, gives time for people to reflect and develop ideas by themselves first. This alleviates any pressure of being put on the spot right away. Once ideas are formed during Me, people compare ideas in pairs or small groups and come together, becoming more aligned. The final Us stage brings the entire group together for more discussion. If people are not aligned, or there is disagreement or misunderstanding, it will manifest here, and the facilitator can intervene.

The number one takeaway is to use small groups when creating and choosing ideas. The formula is simple; the more you work in small groups, the more alignment you create.

6. Use group memory

Group memory is an ongoing record of a group's work during a workshop or meeting. To use group memory, you need to display ideas and other essential pieces of information in the workspace so everyone can always see it. Group memory is something anyone can master. It does not require any special skills or attributes, but people mess this up again and again. Using group memory to visualise ideas helps people focus on decision-making as they can see the subject matter right in front of them, and they are reminded of the task at hand. It also helps the decision-making process because the group can simultaneously keep track of multiple ideas, expanding their brain capacity.

Use group memory

- Use group memory to focus the group and to help decision making.
- Objectives, the agenda (workshop schedule), and instructions are written down and displayed for everyone to see during the workshop.



You also need to visualise the instructions for each group tool you use. Write them down large enough for everyone to see. No matter how well you think you explain the instructions, someone might not understand. An excellent way to simplify things is to use bullet points and write down a simplified version of the instructions. This helps keep people on task, and they can always refer to the visualised instructions as needed.

Conversely, if your instructions are unclear or ambiguous, you can cause disarray and disorder in the group. If a few people lose focus, this spreads within the larger group. Soon the facilitator has a real problem on their hands.

7. Presence

Be present

- The leader actively monitors the group by observing and listening. This lets them know when to step in and help if there are issues that get in the way of the workshop objectives.



All impressive leaders share one thing in common: a strong presence. No, I am not talking about charisma or a bubbly personality. Your presence as a leader is your attentiveness to the group. In other words, you need to be present and monitor how things are coming along. Presence is about observing and listening to the group. If you do this, you can tell when people encounter obstacles and require assistance. If you notice this, you will be able to help clarify a point or explain the instructions differently so that people understand. Maybe you have seen this in practice yourself. Have you ever been in a workshop where the leader seemed to intuitively answer a question you had right before you had the chance to ask it? Or perhaps you had a teacher who always came around your desk at the right time to help motivate you or clarify a point. This is presence in action. Leaders who are not entirely present tend to push forward to the next part of an activity, even if the objectives are not met. Pay close attention to the transitional points between different activities and workshop stages. If the group does not agree on the previous stage's results, you cannot continue. If you continue without an agreement, you will lead them in the wrong direction and further away from the objectives. Listen closely to feedback and try to understand the feeling in the room to ensure that there are no remaining questions, doubts, or concerns. I use dedicated feedback and polling tools for this, along with the simple method of asking people directly for feedback.

A present facilitator also can tell when they need to push people to get back on track and stop counterproductive behaviours. In a dream world, everyone would hang off your every word and give you their complete and undivided attention. Unfortunately, the reality is a bit different, and there are times when people will tune out or begin being drawn to their cell phones. If you spend enough time leading groups, you will see these behaviours from time to time. Do not ignore people if you see them get off task. Instead, ask people to

actively participate by getting back on track and following along with the workshop schedule. If this does not work, be candid and ask why these things are happening. Do not take it personally or get offended. Instead, figure out why these behaviours are happening. Then you can intervene and propose an activity or plan for the rest of the workshop that everyone agrees to follow.

8. Reaching the goal/delivering the objective

The final competency of a great group leader is to make sure that the workshop's objective is achieved. This is your primary job and the reason you spend so much time designing the perfect workshop. But it is not always easy, even for the best leaders. People are unpredictable. You never know who will arrive on time, how focused people will be, the amount of effort they will put forth, or if the right people are even invited to the meeting. You are also working with time constraints; perhaps you are given two hours to tackle a topic, and you suddenly realise that it is so complex that the job would require days.

Reach the goal

- Objectives of the workshop are reached on time
- If targets are not reached, the workshop is paused and the group decides on the next steps
- The outcome is evaluated against the objectives



One significant investment you can make towards the success of your objectives is to come prepared. Create a detailed meeting plan if you have the time to do so. What tools will you use? How much time will you give for each section of the meeting? Do you anticipate any challenges with the topic or materials? By planning ahead, you can dramatically raise your chances of your workshop being a success. However, if for some reason you fail to reach the objectives, be transparent. Agree with the group on the next steps and what happens next. This could mean another workshop to deal with a re-framed topic, or it could mean focusing on the delivered content and shifting or abandoning the original objective.

I remember speaking with a facilitator friend about a strategy workshop she led. About two hours into the session, it became apparent that the group was not producing enough content to move forward. Some ideas were created initially, but they could not be developed. Why? The participants were unfamiliar with the nuances it would take to implement the ideas. In other words, they were creating surface-level ideas but could not elaborate on them due to a lack of expert knowledge. How did my friend react? She stopped the session, talked about it, and decided to put the workshop on hold for two weeks while

everyone researched the topic. Once everyone had the chance to prepare adequately, she would lead a new strategy workshop and try again.

Talking with the group about failed objectives can turn a bad situation into a productive one. Compare the results against the original workshop goal and evaluate them together. There is always something gained from a workshop, even if it is not the original objective.

Last but not least, assess the results. Show the group the workshop's objective and ask everyone their thoughts about if they reached the goals. Yes, this can be dangerous—maybe five hands will shoot up into the air, and multiple people will tell you that they think your workshop was a waste of time. Wouldn't it be easier to end things on a high note instead? No! Perhaps someone is unhappy, but it is far better to deal with the fact right there than to have people suffer in silence and talk about it behind your back later.

Conclusion: What comes next?

Next time you have the chance to facilitate a session, take an inventory and see how many of these eight key competencies you use. It might seem overwhelming if you try and implement all eight at once, so feel free to focus on one or two at a time. For example, are you remaining neutral to the content and not becoming invested in an outcome? Once you have this one down, you can focus on the next competency. Do you remain present and accessible to the group? If there are questions, do you offer help while not feeding them solutions? Once you can honestly say you do these things, great! Another competency you can check off your list and move on to the next one!

Taking inventory of these competencies and how well you use them is not something you only do once. You need to check in with yourself periodically to make sure that your facilitative foundation is strong.

So, by now, you understand the eight key competencies and why they are important to being a good leader. But what next? One excellent resource for free materials like blog posts and guidebooks like this is the Materials section on Grape People's website. Here's the link: <https://www.grapepeople.com/blog>

Sign up for a facilitation newsletter, and why not bookmark the Grape People Blog? It is a useful (and free!) resource for new and experienced facilitators alike. And if the information in this guidebook leaves you thirsty for more facilitation knowledge or motivates you to do a training or a workshop with them, reach out, and the passionate facilitators at Grape People will be glad to help you on your way.

For now, thanks for reading and good luck as you continue growing as a facilitator.