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Facilitation in Eastern Europe – Experience from Serbia (and Montenegro)

Sladana Milošević | Bojan Đurić

Mobilis Ltd is a small company that has been providing facilitation, coaching and training in Serbia since 2005. Before establishing Mobilis, principals Sladana Milošević and Bojan Đurić worked as freelancers for different donors and international organizations in Serbia. During that period they attended trainings in participation skills and different Train-the-Trainers courses where they learned about facilitation and coaching.

They joined IAF in 2006, after learning about IAF from UK facilitator Tim Sims, with whom they had often worked in Serbia since 2002, and attended IAF Europe conferences in 2006 and 2007.

Mobilis has collaborated with facilitators from other countries on projects implemented by United Nations, Municipal Support Program of Swiss Embassy and different programs funded by EU, and facilitated planning retreats for companies in the business sector. For the first time this year, Mobilis delivered facilitation skills training in the Serbian language for the employees of Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities.

Sladjana and Bojan are part of the group of Ser-

bian facilitators who established the IAF Serbia Network and actively participate in its work.

The IAF Europe Newsletter is delighted that they are able to share their experiences about facilitating in Serbia with the rest of IAF's European membership.

What is different in Eastern Europe (Serbia) ?

*During seven years in providing facilitation in Serbia, and also in Montenegro (now a separate country), we identified situations and problems that usually occurred in preparing the facilitation event, during facilitation itself, and after the event. The list presented here is a list of **all typical situations we identified during this time**. At the beginning, it was more difficult than today as people are now more familiar with the concept of facilitation.*

The recent history (many years of country isolation, wars during the 1990s, hyperinflation and a bad economic situation) changed people and their views. Some old cultural and social habits that reflect on facilitation events are still

present and very difficult to change. In the text given below we tried to present them in details. We also presented ways to overcome problems and difficult situations.

Preparation of the event

- Preparation is considered important for clients although they often cannot clearly state what they want to be the result and what is the purpose of the event. Process-oriented working culture is dominant – i.e. focus on process, not on results.
- Preparation is always done in a “last minute” way.

We have developed a questionnaire for the preparation of facilitation event that our clients have to fill in long enough before the event and to focus on results they want to achieve. This is a good way to show them that preparation is important, that it has to be very detailed and result-oriented, and that we want everything in a written form.

Beginning of the event

- Rules: While participants usually fully agree with the rules defined, they tend not to respect them during the work. For example, mobile phones are widely used during meetings and other events.
- Very bad time management. In our culture, it is a habit to be late and although participants agree with a rule “Be on time” at the start, often they do not respect it during the event itself. In order to respect rules, we usually introduce an



Facilitation skills training (in Serbian) for employees of Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities, Belgrade, Serbia, April 2008

activity that participant has to perform if he/she breaks the rule (singing in front of the group is something that helps a lot – people are embarrassed to sing so they avoid breaking rules).

- Status in this part of Europe is very important, so it is difficult for participants to accept the rule, 'No titles'. Some participants even refuse to participate under this rule.
- Large distance between people with status/titles and those without them. It has happened many times that if a person works in a group of participants who are his/her subordinates, they tend not to participate fully but rather listen to what their superior will say/decide.

We always give very clear instructions about why we want everyone to be equal in the process.

- We have to be very careful with warm-ups, ice-breakers and energizers. Participants tend to

call it “playing games instead of working seriously”. This is because of the school system used in this region for many years that is still dominant even today.

We choose ice-breakers and energizers depending on the structure of the group. We regularly use the IAF methods database.

At the beginning of the event:

- The facilitator’s role has to be clear. The differences between facilitator, trainer and lecturer should be explained as people usually have different expectations of facilitators
- The senior person should introduce the facilitator, especially female facilitators. In the male dominated culture which we have here, this is very important and always helps.
- People do not like long introductions and too much self-promotion of the facilitator at the beginning of the event. The facilitator should write about himself/herself and mention academic titles and positions he/she holds (something that participants will recognize and respect, like academic titles)

During the event

- At the beginning of our work (in 2001), people were not used to active participation (no learning through practical exercises)
- “Blame culture” is dominant. Participants are afraid to make mistakes, and very often, they are blocked and do not participate fully.
- If they do not understand, they will not admit or ask for clarification (“teacher should not be

asked” rule in our schools)

- Participants usually expect the facilitator to “show subject knowledge” (“power of having knowledge”)
- Participants have strong “respect for teachers” and they expect lecturing most of the time. Sometimes simulations, role-plays, and drawing exercises are not acceptable. When we attended IAF conferences in 2006 and 2007, we were amazed to see that everybody is ready to “play”.

During the process, we show participants how much we appreciate their input and how important it is for them to share their ideas. This motivates them to participate and openly present their views.

- Participants very often show a negative attitude towards everything, rather than a positive thinking approach. (This is a dominant way of thinking in life in general).
- “Short-term thinking perspective” is evident. For instance, when asked to define goals and priorities during strategic planning sessions, they would say “We should stop talking and planning; let’s start with some actions finally!”
- Sensitivity to western culture best-practices and examples is also evident

We simply must avoid western culture best-practices and examples and we always try to find domestic ones.

- During team work, participants do not speak openly and give feedback to each other but rather speak behind others’ backs (cultural issue)

- People are more oriented toward people than toward tasks. This has to be respected in this part of Europe.
- We have to try harder than facilitators from Western countries for whom participants have more respect
- Besides dominant male culture, there is another thing: respect for older people (here "old" means "experienced"). So as a young person, you are often considered to be not experienced enough.

It is important to present your qualifications so to show participants that you have enough experi-

ence (academic degree, good references...)

- Working in Serbia and working in UK for instance is different; we did staff retreats facilitation with UK team of facilitators in Serbia in 2006 – 4 of us had difficulties to facilitate the event of 80 participants. Our UK colleagues noticed that it is because of "cultural differences".

During our many years of working with facilitators from UK, we discovered that foreigners can help us as facilitators by giving us the same tasks and level of responsibility as they have. When we are presented as equal partners in the prepara-



Facilitation of pre-training for Business Start-up Centre Bar,, SPARK project(Dutch funded), Podgorica, Montenegro, March 2008

tion, delivery and reporting of the event, this gives local audiences a clear picture of our capacities.

Feedback

- Participants are not used to giving honest and "positive feedback with effects". Actually they do not know how to do it and they do not understand the benefits of it. People are not used to feedback here in general.

We always emphasize the importance of feedback for our personal improvement and how much we appreciate it ("we will not be offended if they say what should be improved").

- Some participants use negative feedback that is actually not helping facilitators to improve their work

After the event

- There is no practice of lessons learned to be shared.

Although most of the time reports are not demanded, we always prepare and share them. Our clients usually like it and find it very useful. As well, new methods that we develop are available on our Website.

Demand for facilitation

- There is still a very little demand for facilitation of staff retreats or strategic planning retreats in the business sector.
- In some cases there is no real understanding of what facilitation is.

(We do not translate the word facilitator into our

language but instead we use word "Fasilitacija, fasilitator" (recently one of our participant at the workshop said: "I thought you are falsificators").

Conclusions

Despite the challenges, it is good to be in a position to present people with new approaches and new ways of thinking and solving problems, doing planning, creative thinking, out of box thinking, evaluation of work... Once they realize how beneficial it is and how oriented towards them it is, they appreciate it very much.

There are huge potentials for development and practicing facilitation in Serbia, and we will continue to 'create' the market. We hope that in doing so, we will have the great support of IAF, whom we promote strongly in our country.

For preparation of this article we used:

"Successfully Facilitating Multicultural Groups" by Christine Hogan, The IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation, edited by Sandy Schuman, Copyright IAF, 2005, Published by Jossey-Bass



First initial meeting as an IAF Serbia Network