

FACILITATION INSPIRED BY JAZZ IMPROVISATION

What, exactly, is being facilitated in a formation experience? Those of us leading formation experiences refer to what we do as facilitation. We avoid describing our role as teaching. The latter largely entails brainpower, whereas formation involves something more. It involves joining head and heart to connect with the organization's purpose or mission.



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Facilitation also differs from giving a presentation or lecture. Formation does involve delivering content, but it goes further with the sails of skilled facilitation. The point is more than semantics, as it gets to the heart of formation to ensure the flourishing of the people and the ministry itself, now and into the future.

GUIDING EXPLORATION

To better amplify the significance of facilitation in a formation experience, consider a musical analogy. Teaching or delivering a presentation involves following a lesson or text, much the way a musician follows a score. A symphony orchestra follows the notes on the page. Classical composers occasionally include a cadenza midway into a concerto. Here, the soloist enjoys the freedom to explore the composition's themes independently, without the constraints of the conductor and the orchestral musicians.

In jazz, the written score is held loosely by the musicians. They routinely give one another a solo spotlight, during which a player improvises, sometimes in a lengthy exploration on the chord structure and themes, varying and embellishing them. The soloist also enjoys the support of the other musicians, who vamp, providing a short sequence of chords as background. The soloist concludes the improvisational exploration, returning to the music's structural flow with the other ensemble members.

Facilitation is like jazz. A skilled facilitator must embrace improvisation. That means the leader loosely holds the materials or the content

for the formation session. In doing so, the facilitator empowers participants and the whole group to explore many dimensions of the topic. Often, the group exploration goes in directions that could only have been vaguely anticipated by the program leader. And this may be exactly what the group needs.

The facilitator creates the space and freedom for these skilled healthcare experts to explore the foundational elements of the organization's Catholic identity, to understand them, and to consider how they relate to their role. The individuals themselves need to first come to a sense of the foundational theme. Then, hearing their peers discuss it in their own context and leadership style, an individual can begin to realize how the topic intersects with their own work and leadership.¹

Talking about the topic together (rather than being talked at) enables participants to play around with the foundational topic. They can try it on, turn it around, pull it inside out and adjust it upside down. Eventually, they come to see how it fits within the organization's purpose, the ministry that continues Jesus' healing mission. This is how leaders discover what they need to do with it in their own leadership, among their teams and in their strategies.

CREATING CONNECTIONS

As the group dialogue unfolds, the formation facilitator creates the conditions for connection and discovery to emerge within the individual participants and among the group. Connections occur at multiple levels. Here are five to consider:

First, the facilitator strives to foster connections among the participants themselves. As CHA's definition of ministry formation explains, it "creates experiences ... to discover connections

between personal meaning and organizational purpose,” and allows participants to “articulate, integrate and implement the foundational elements of Catholic health ministry so that it flourishes now and into the future.” The first connection is within the persons themselves. They explore how and where their own values and purpose align with the organization’s mission, vision and values. Those connections fuel their leadership and energize their teams.

Second, the facilitator gives attention to the connections between the participants. High-quality facilitation ensures that small- and full-group dialogues flow with ease, enabling a variety of voices, including counterpoints or “yes, but” perspectives, to enter the conversation. When group energy is lacking or dialogue is sparse, the facilitator reorients and considers offering a different prompt and a new way of approaching the topic.

Then, there is what we call weaving. Two key areas that are important for weaving are making connections to the ministry’s operations and to other foundational elements in the formation program. When the group may be narrowly focused on a particular point or one dimension of a foundational element, a skilled facilitator weaves in a practical application to operations, patient care, strategic planning, etc.

A fourth connection occurs when the facilitator weaves the current experience to other formation experiences. This is particularly effective in a formation program with an established curriculum. In early sessions, the facilitator can foreshadow other foundational elements that will be addressed. Conversely, in later sessions, the facilitator reconnects to previous topics. Even better is when the facilitator recalls specific points or examples given by group participants and offers it back to them in a way that creates a layering effect.

Lastly, and arguably most importantly, the facilitator seeks to draw an awareness of the presence of God among the group. The facilitator accomplishes this by observing what lies beyond the people, the group and the conversation — naming the transcendence in the moment. This may occur as a closing ritual when participants reflect on the experience they just had, the moments, people and conversations that touched them. Often, they become aware of something beautiful, a transformative movement or a sense of awe.

THE ART OF FACILITATING

Facilitating these connections is an art. Mission

leaders and any facilitator enter into a formation experience with a heightened awareness to look for these connections. This is why CHA offers its “Levels of Awareness for Facilitating Formation” resource.² Facilitators attend to multiple layers of connection as the experience unfolds. An awareness of five distinct levels is a hefty task, especially for one person. Many longer formation programs benefit from two facilitators, who support each other and the full group in making multiple connections and weaving content and experiences together.

Creating the conditions for connections can involve a number of techniques. Here are three:

First, facilitators practice the art of the response. The facilitator plays an outsized role in how they respond to participants in a group discussion. A skilled facilitator listens beyond and beneath the particular words to draw forth the group’s wisdom. The facilitator then tests themes that seem to emerge by offering them back to the group, checking for validation or alternative perspectives. In other words, the goal is not to focus on the facilitator, but rather to discover the group’s emerging wisdom. Responding with “thank you” is woefully insufficient, as it neither advances the conversation nor fosters connection, both of which are needed for formation.

Second, surfacing alternative perspectives is important. Facilitators become accustomed to inviting counterpoints. The facilitator develops flexibility to navigate topics or situations that others may initially find uncomfortable. This, coupled with the skill of weaving, can make the conversation relevant and applicable, so that participants see and value the connections.

Lastly, the skilled facilitator uses silence to help the group become comfortable with it. Less experienced facilitators tend to rush in to fill the void. They may respond with words and explanations like a reaction. A more experienced facilitator may simply respond with “Hmm.” Intentional silence may be exactly what participants need to discover the connections before them.

EASING THE WAY FOR DEEPER CONNECTIONS

Formation facilitation involves the dynamic exploration between the participants, the culture and the Catholic tradition.³ Since formation is not explicitly in the business of educating, but rather accompanying, encountering and uncovering, the formation facilitator weaves connections among the elements of the formation triangle.

The word “facilitation” derives from the Latin word *facilis*, meaning “to make easy.” The mission leader’s role, then, is to ease the way for participants to connect deeply with themselves, with one another, with the ministry’s mission and, quite possibly, with God.

This column drew from conversations with Laura Rakestraw, director of mission at Mercy. She led a series of conversations on facilitation with other mission leaders. They shared learnings from their practices using CHA’s Levels of Awareness for Facilitating Formation resource.

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NOTES

1. “Framework for Ministry Formation,” Catholic Health Association, 2020, https://www.chausa.org/docs/default-source/formation-resources/framework-for-ministry-formation_v11.pdf.
2. “Levels of Awareness for Facilitating Formation,” Catholic Health Association, 2025, <https://www.chausa.org/docs/default-source/member-only/focus-areas/ministry-formation/levels-of-awareness-for-facilitating-formation.pdf>. For an understanding of the distinction between a formation program and experience or reflection, see page 7 in the following: “Ministry Formation for All Workers,” Catholic Health Association, March 2025, <https://www.chausa.org/docs/default-source/ministry-formation/formation-for-all-workers.pdf>.
3. Darren M. Henson, “How Experience, Culture and Tradition Shape Catholic Healthcare: The Formation Triangle,” *Health Progress* 107, no. 3 (Summer 2026): <https://www.chausa.org/news-and-publications/publications/health-progress/archives/summer-2026/formation---how-experience-culture-and-tradition-shape-catholic-healthcare--the-formation-triangle>.

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