

The Humble Flipchart – the Project Manager’s Best Friend

There can be many times during your project that you will need to workshop with your team to solve problems. The humble flipchart is a must-use tool in these circumstances as it provides a great platform for facilitation. This no-nonsense low tech tool doesn't require any special training or skills and can be used by anyone that can write.

I love the flip chart. It doesn't need to be plugged in, rebooted, the lamp won't blow and it doesn't care about my laptop or its screen resolution. It can be used everywhere, it can be placed anywhere and it can even be put on the table in the middle of all the brainstormers!

The flipchart can be a powerhouse and:

- Provides focus for the team
- Records and displays our thoughts so far
- Communicates more than words and sometimes what words cannot
- Invites participation and when participants see their ideas up there in print, this encourages even more and better participation
- Leverages the diverse knowledge, skills and experiences in the team towards specific objectives
- Captures the thoughts of all and not just your own
- Provides a platform for all to refer to and work from
- Verifies that all contributions have been accepted, understood and are of value
- Allows fast forward and rewind back and forth to add to or reposition a particular point. Pages can be reordered easily with the help of tape or bluetack
- The results can be folded up and carried away for further work such as transcription and circulation
- These days it is easy to take photographs of the flip chart pages using a small digital camera. The output of the workshop can then be printed out and/or circulated by email and put on the electronic record of your project

However, like all other tools of facilitation, the effectiveness of the session depends on the skill of the facilitator in using the tool. The tips below will help:

- Write the objectives, duration and finish time of the workshop on page one and put it up on the wall
- Post a "Parking Lot" page on the wall to record side issues or those outside of the objectives of this particular workshop. This is also useful to record areas of conflict or different views. This will avoid the team getting bogged down and being diverted from the task at hand. At the end of the workshop, determine if how and when those issues will be addressed
- Print neatly and don't scrawl
- Bring plenty of fresh markers as there is nothing as bad as a marker that is on its last legs
- Don't be slow to get others to work the flip chart. For example, if a particular team member is leading on an aspect of the project, or someone has a eureka moment, let them take over. You are in a sense handing over control to team members. This gives them an opportunity to shine and to develop and promotes buy-in
- Record what participants say and not your interpretation of what they say
- If you think a better form of words could be used, get permission before making the change

- Keep all information visible. When a page is full, don't hide it away behind the next page. Tear it out and put it up on the wall using tape or bluetack. (Be careful not to use anything that will damage or mark the wall on removal).
- Don't turn your back on the team but face the flip chart from the side so as all can see what you are writing
- Don't overdo the use of colour. Three colours is more than enough
- Use the KISS (**K**ee**P** **I**t **S**imple **S**tupid) approach
- Produce summary pages every now and then. This provides an opportunity to reflect back what has happened so far to ensure clarity of understanding among the whole team
- The last page should record conclusions, decisions made, action items defined and the responsible person, sub-group or body

Then just roll them up and walk away content in the knowledge that this has been time well spent.

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