

The Essential Facilitator Bridge “Mind the Gap”

by *Ellen Livingood*

If you have ridden the London tube, you have heard that disembodied voice imploring you to “Mind the gap!” as you stepped on or off the subway cars. Londoners have a hard time understanding why Americans are so taken with the phrase that they tote home mugs and tee-shirts bearing the reminder.

But “Mind the gap!” is a wise admonition for churches embarking on global partnerships. There’s a deep chasm of language, culture, and religious differences separating Western churches from most of those to, and with whom, they want to minister.

Why do partnerships need a facilitator?

When asked that question, one seasoned church missions leader said, “That’s simple—because partnerships don’t work without them!”

Mind the gap: In a few global locations where the language and culture differences are minimal, churches may be able to jump the gap successfully. But there are lots of horror stories about partnerships launched without a facilitator that have been swallowed by the wider-than-anticipated chasm. Other churches have thought they could take the leap by themselves, but splattered in a mess on the other side. Those “splatters” are painful for everybody. Facilitators are bridges—and we need them!

Few local churches have the expertise to understand the local ministry setting well enough to go it on their own. Without a competent facilitator, they can choose the wrong partners, invest funds inappropriately, offend nationals by cultural gaffes, and make ill-advised commitments.

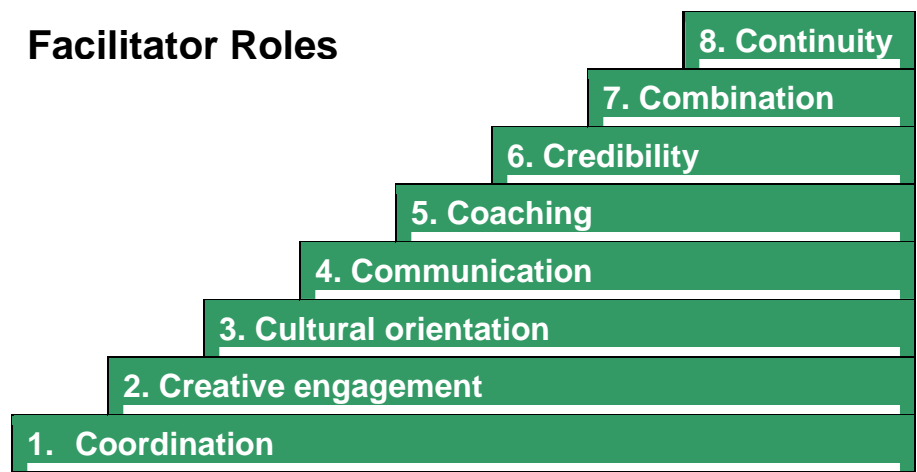
The facilitator may be a missionary, some other expatriate worker, or a national. It may be someone informally filling a part-time role or an individual contracted for a full-time job. Regardless, the facilitator spans the gap and exponentially increases the likelihood of partnership success.

What does a partnership facilitator do?

Facilitators fulfill many different roles, but for simplicity, we have divided them into eight “C” categories which represent a general progression in complexity:

- 1. Coordination.** When churches initially approach the possibility of partnership, they usually look for someone to handle the logistics of on-site visits. Someone has to arrange for transportation, housing, translators, etc., but these services represent only the beginning of facilitation.
- 2. Creative engagement.** The facilitator (working with national partners, where there are such) identifies ways the Western church could contribute to the effort. “Creative” is the operative word here: The best facilitators are always seeing new ways to use a plethora of partner

Facilitator Roles



skills and resources to further the work. But creative engagement also involves setting up encounters where Western and national believers can build relationships, and where Westerners can be ministered to by their national brothers and sisters, making the partnership a rich, two-way relationship.

- 3. Cultural orientation.** Most missionaries provide at least a few hours of initial orientation to the country, culture, and religion when short-term teams arrive, but the partnership



facilitator goes beyond that to help both going and receiving partners understand and appreciate what others bring to the table. Rather than wringing their hands after short-termers have come and created a mess, they take leadership from the beginning, structuring training and activities for effective ministry (recognizing that some level of risk is inherent to the process).

- 4. **Communication.** The necessity of keeping information flowing to the church is often underemphasized during partnership launch, but it may be the single greatest reason for long-term failure. The facilitator needs (1) the capacity to see the big picture of what God is doing, (2) the ability to translate it into powerful stories (and pictures, if possible) for those in the partnering church, and (3) the self discipline to do so on a very frequent schedule.

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- 5. **Coaching/Mentoring.** The most effective facilitators can focus in two directions at once! They have a zeal for what God is doing on the field, but they also are passionately involved in igniting global vision in the partner church. They create opportunities to mentor leaders, nurturing missions passion through relationships.

When partnerships feature or grow into church-to-church relationships, the facilitator takes on the role of coach. The challenge is to know how much to guide the process and when to let the partners work on their own. The law of inertia applies to partnerships, and momentum often slows unless the facilitator helps maintain energy.

- 6. **Credibility.** In order to build bridges between going and receiving churches, the facilitator often has to “loan” his credibility to one or both groups until they can establish their own. Especially in places where there have been bad experiences in the past, a partnership may be welcomed only because the facilitator will “vouch” for the integrity of the other partner(s). In such cases, the facilitator lays his reputation on the line.

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- 7. **Combination.** In more complex partnerships involving multiple partners, the role of the facilitator includes blending the contributions of various Western and national churches, agencies, NGOs, etc. Informal or more structured networks may be needed to fully engage all of the potential. The facilitator may move into the role of an international coordinator of a multifaceted entity.

- 8. **Continuity.** Partnerships are never static, and facilitators will need to help partners negotiate change, whether it is precipitated by positive or negative factors. Assisting partners to transition from one phase to the next in their relationship is a happy part of the job, but sadly there are also times when the facilitator is left to pick up the pieces when a partnership has ended prematurely or badly.

How can we make facilitators most effective in their role?

On the Church Side:

- **Provide logistical and other support for your facilitator.** Search for ways to make his job easier: Could someone go two weeks ahead of your short-term teams to help with preparations? Could you send a communications team to “get the story” and share it with your church and other partners? Could your facilitator train a member of your congregation to do some pre-field orientation for future teams? Could you send someone to provide childcare for your facilitator so both husband and wife can concentrate on facilitation duties?
- **Underwrite expenses.** Is your facilitator incurring costs associated with the partnership? Is her basic support and salary covered adequately? If you want him to visit regularly, have you made provision to cover the travel expenses?
- **Respect your facilitator’s judgment.** If your facilitator recommends against a particular project or activity, take his advice! Remember that her relationship with local coworkers can be jeopardized by your actions. Be responsive to guidance and sensitive to what he tells you is important, even if it does not seem particularly significant to you.
- **Be sensitive to your facilitator’s schedule.** Make sure trips are planned at a time that is convenient and do not conflict with other important ministry or family responsibilities. Don’t demand unusual service while on site. Your facilitator undoubtedly is juggling many demands and is not exclusively your “employee.”
- **Fill training gaps.** Ask your facilitator if there are skills she would like to hone. For example, could someone in your church offer one-on-one training in simple accounting or develop a graphic design template for a quarterly partnership report?
 Could someone with skills gained in the marketplace share ideas on developing stronger teams or leading groups through consensus building?
- **Appreciate the value of your facilitator’s investment in making your partnership successful.** Encourage your facilitator in every way possible. Publicly acknowledge the value of his contribution.
- **Recruit more people to be facilitators.** Ask God to raise up one or more people from your congregation to fulfill this crucial role for future partnerships.

On the Agency Side:

- **Affirm missionaries and nationals currently serving in a facilitator role**, regardless of whether they carry the title. Highlight what they are doing and how God is using their partnership work to further His purposes. Confirm the fact that their work is strategic in what is being accomplished even though others may officially get the credit for it.
- **Seek out those with facilitation gifts** and encourage them to proactively develop partnerships as a significant part of their ministry. Encourage missionaries to identify nationals and fellow missionaries with gifting for this role. Write one or more sample job descriptions to help clarify the task.
- **Offer specific training and networking opportunities.** Determine what types of training would help facilitators improve their skills. Bring them together so that they can learn from one another.
- **Do everything possible to increase facilitators' capacity.** In most places, partnerships could be multiplied if there were more facilitators available. What could you do to free up facilitators and potential facilitators for this strategic task?
- **Challenge churches to recruit and send facilitators.** Confirm to churches the crucial role these people play and ask them to look for others with these skills who could fill a similar strategic role.

How do we find the right facilitator?

On the following page is a profile that presents many facilitator competencies. Few potential facilitators will bring all of these abilities and skills to the task.

Churches: Rather than serving as a checklist, the profile is designed for discussion purposes. If that particular competency is important but not a strength of your facilitator, you will want to work together to determine how to best cover that area of leadership or service.

Facilitators/Team Members: Your team may want to use this list to discuss how you will jointly service one or more partnerships. If one of your team members is facilitating a partnership, how can others come alongside to share the load and fill in areas outside his gifting?

Agencies: This profile may help you identify potential facilitators, pinpoint some areas for training, or outline topics for dialog among current and future partnership facilitators.



Ellen Livingood, the head of Catalyst Services, has had the privilege to work with and learn from some excellent facilitators.

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Partnership Facilitator Profile

Not every partnership requires all of these characteristics and skills. Determine which are important for your particular initiative. Agree on ways to cover areas in which the facilitator can't or doesn't want to function. Are there ways to strengthen areas in which the facilitator may feel inadequate?

#	Relevant to Our Partnership?	Competence Area
1.		English. Speaks English fluently and shares the nationality of the partnering church or has spent significant time in that culture.
2.		Local language and culture. Speaks the language and is comfortable in the culture of the people to/with whom the church will minister. Has a contagious passion to minister to these people.
3.		Character. Is a person of mature, godly character, well respected by fellow workers and by leaders of the national church in the area or, if in an unreached area, the national leaders in the region. Also has a history of a healthy relationship with his agency.
4.		Church vision. Believes that God has given the missions mandate to the church not just to long-term workers, and is excited about the church's ownership of the initiative.
5.		Missiology. Has sufficient missiological background to understand important issues that should help to shape and direct partnership strategy and work.
6.		Investment in church. Is committed to invest significant time and energy in the expansion of the partnering church's missions vision and to mobilizing that congregation's many untapped resources. This includes being available to personally visit the partner church on a mutually agreed schedule.
7.		Consensus building. Has the ability to bring people with differing viewpoints together around a table, identify key issues, and move the group toward consensus. Relates well to people of various ages, backgrounds, and personal styles.
8.		Leadership. Has an urgency about getting things done and a proven track record of accomplishing major projects. Is able to say "no" to requests and suggestions that she feels do not best serve the ministry or the partnership and can hold partners accountable to fulfill their commitments.
9.		Creativity. Is creative in identifying new opportunities and in problem solving.
10.		Flexibility. Is flexible and open to change.
11.		Short-term team coordination. Is willing and able to coordinate short-term teams or to arrange for others to do so if he is not available.
12.		Project management skills. Is a good project manager who can coordinate the involvement of multiple partners in a well integrated effort.
13.		Communication skills. Is able to capture in writing/video what is happening on the field and communicate effectively to the partnering church. Is willing to commit to doing so regularly or will make sure that someone else with these gifts fulfills this role.
14.		Financial management skills. Is capable of sound financial management or has a competent person to whom this responsibility can be delegated.
15.		Translation services. Is willing to be a translator and communications conduit between the church and field partners who do not speak English and/or do not have (secure) computer access. Or will be responsible to see that someone else fulfills this role.
16.		Coaching/Mentoring skills. Is a good mentor/coach willing to invest time in those from the partnering church to develop character and ministry skills.
17.		Networking connection. Is available and willing to participate in network meetings on a fairly regular basis and will further network efforts as able.
18.		Spouse/Team approval. If married, the facilitator has a spouse who is also enthusiastic about the partnership initiative and eager to be as supportive as possible. If part of a team, the facilitator has the approval of teammates to invest the time required to see the partnership be successful.