

FACILITATOR AS PROVOCATEUR

Selling has evolved. Facilitating learning is next.

The dynamics of VUCA—our contemporary world of growing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity—are disrupting a number of professions. We at JMReid Group are experiencing a real shift in what participants need and value in classroom learning: instructors who, beyond facilitating content, also challenge perspectives. This, which we’re committed to helping accelerate, is mirrored in the world of complex sales.

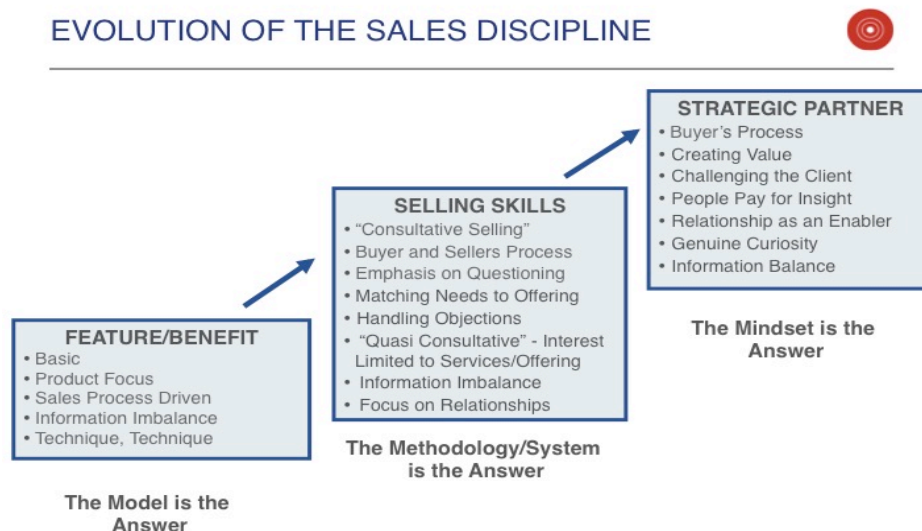
In the 1960s, salespeople were taught to focus primarily on products and services. The motto at the time, which had permeated the culture, was ‘buyer beware’—appropriate guidance since the seller usually had more knowledge than the buyer.

The advent of consultative selling disrupted this paradigm in the 1990s. Consultative selling was designed to respond to increasing complexity in both the buyer’s organization and the buyer’s needs.

In consultative selling, the focus is on questioning. Salespeople are taught to develop ability in asking questions so the client will discover and acknowledge they are struggling with some organizational pain; the salesperson then offers their goods and services to resolve it. And while this sales method appears more client-centric, it does require a client’s significant time commitment.

Recently, salespeople have been directed to bring insight and to challenge their clients’ thinking. Given the current pressures and the need for increased productivity and efficiency, the salesperson must do more than simply pitch and probe. The mantra is now to create—not just communicate—value by challenging their customers.

EVOLUTION OF THE SALES DISCIPLINE



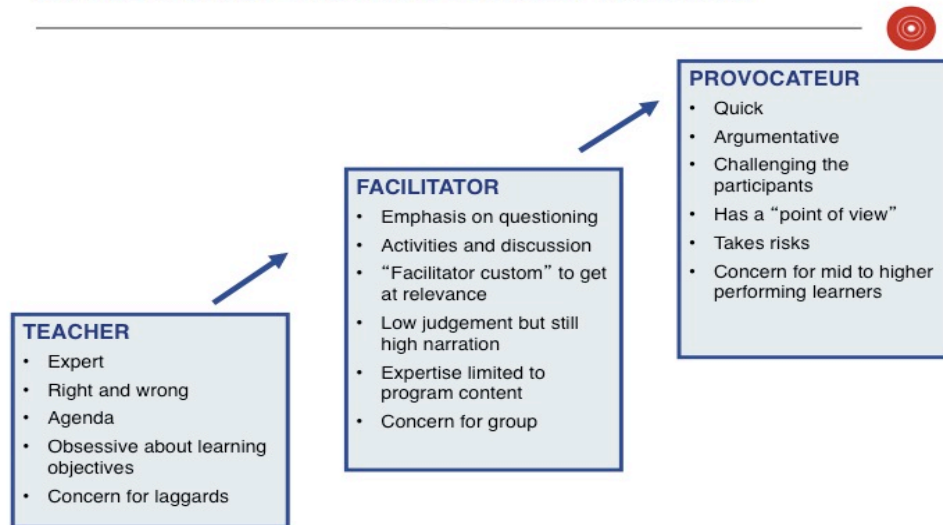
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The old model of training facilitator as teacher also came to us in the 1960s. This model held that the facilitator controlled the knowledge, and participants were there to listen and absorb. This approach was effectively replaced in the '80s by the facilitative model, in which the job of the facilitator is to ask questions in service of the participants' self-discovery toward the best path forward.

Today, however, the same challenges facing sellers in dealing with buyers, face training participants – namely, having less time with which to handle more complexity. If facilitators are to be effective in this kind of environment, they must likewise provoke and add insight.

It is time (perhaps overdue) for the facilitator as provocateur—an agent whose works, ideas or classroom activities can be regarded as a threat to accepted values or practices. Provocation doesn't come in a single flavor, and making trouble for the sake of making trouble isn't beneficial. In the case of learning, provocation means challenging and changing existing perspectives and behaviors.

EVOLUTION OF INSTRUCTOR LED TRAINING



What does it take to facilitate as a provocateur?

Meaningful provocation obliges facilitators to understand the tensions and arguments embedded in the content they're delivering. It takes depth of knowledge and experience to usefully challenge the mental models of an increasingly smart participant group. Facilitators' confidence can no longer come from 'being certified' by a training company, but rather from the rich experience of living the subject and struggling with its issues.

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Facilitator as provocateur must speak from a considered point of view—which can be difficult for traditionally developed facilitators, exacerbated if they are charged with merely delivering off-the-shelf intellectual property (IP). If a facilitator teaches the *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, one learns about this program through a team skills training company. They learn what to say, why to say it and when to say it. But they do not typically delve into other areas related to teamwork, other team models, the evolution of teamwork or competing teamwork theories.

For this kind of facilitator to be effective, they need to read deeply and think deeply. They need to prepare to both build trust, and challenge their own and others' thinking from the moment they enter the training.

This is a new, exciting challenge for facilitators, and time is of the essence. People are desperate to improve, and hungry for release from the static and fixed mental models that inflict the knowledge worker, the 'expert.'

This table outlines the differences between the traditional and the new models of facilitation:

Classic Facilitator	Facilitator as Provocateur
Frames the topic in black and white/right or wrong terms	Frames the topic as complex, filled with tensions and trade-offs to explore
Continues to ask, "What else?" to learners	Is clear on key points, solicits from the group, and when the point is made, closes down the discussion
Is uncomfortable telling learners they are wrong	Confidently shares research and its implications to challenge learners' points of view
Delivers in a way that attempts to pull slower learners forward	Delivers to mid- to high-performing learners who 'get it'
Thinks learning is about transferring knowledge and skills	Knows learning starts with mindset, mental models and beliefs
Possesses deep familiarity with program they're delivering	Commands broad-based familiarity with the topic area from a variety of sources
Defaults to using more time	Defaults to moving faster
Worries about learner comfort	Worries about level of learner challenge

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The facilitator as provocateur understands that a participant's behavior (e.g., not speaking up, not collaborating, etc.) is driven by certain perceived (and often unspoken) set of trade-offs and risk assessments. It is in this rich discussion and debate about the real tensions that the learner will feel valued in their current behaviors, and potentially embrace a different path forward.

And from an instructional design perspective, the facilitator as provocateur requires a program design that addresses the whole learner (mindset, beliefs and attitude), while also offering skills and tools.

What else?

Salespeople know that face-to-face conversations with the clients are the most valuable moments to build rapport, understand needs and provide insight—the best environment to challenge the customer's thinking and create value. And successful salespeople know their clients are smart. Smart salespeople listen to and learn from their customers.

Likewise, provocation works best in person. It is in the live classroom environment where learners and facilitators possess all the advantages to accelerate a change in perspective and behavior. Facilitators need to demonstrate great respect for and build on 'the wisdom in the room,' while they work to challenge and change.

Virtual learning, with its inherent limitations, increases the likelihood of facilitators challenging poorly, and equally likely for participants' fight or flight. Defensiveness is easier when outside a group, sharing a physical room more plainly dominated by social norms. Fleeing is easier; the technology itself offers an easy escape.

The future is now. The value of classroom training is at risk. Facilitators who don't change will soon be relegated to lunch and learns and webinars. Few clients *want to be challenged*, but the research is clear that they reward salespeople who do just that. Similarly, learners are not *saying* "provoke me," but they are still hungry for rich learning engagements that lead to new, more productive approaches.