

Initial Contact

IT MAY HAPPEN with a phone call, through an advertisement, a request for a proposal, or on the basis of a discussion with a colleague. Regardless of how it occurs, an initial contact to explore possible process consulting work is all about people screening one another, the situation, the expectations, the time, and the cost involved in completing a potential assignment.

During these preliminary discussions, basic information and impressions are exchanged so that all parties can decide whether to move forward and develop an agreement or not. This chapter provides the information needed to support productive exchanges among the various parties during these first encounters.

When external process consultants are involved, they are usually looking for information that will help them be successful in bidding on a project or make a decision about whether they can or want to do the work. When internal process consultants are involved, they have often been assigned the work and are looking for information to help them do the best job possible, either on their own or working with colleagues. In situations where the manager is also the process designer and facilitator, the same information needs to be gathered to support the development of a meaningful process. Exhibit 1.1 contains an outline you can use when conducting a preliminary screen. The following section of this chapter offers guidelines and definitions for completing this tool.

When this preliminary screening is completed, all parties should have a sense of the potential scope of the proposed process, the people involved, and whether this would be a good fit for each party. When push comes to shove, it's a lot like buying a house or starting a new job: you only really understand what's involved by living in it.



EXHIBIT 1.1: The Preliminary Screen

1. What are the coordinates: date(s) and location?

2. What are the purpose, outcomes, and deliverables (if the latter are known)?

3. Process leadership: what's in place? (See the definitions later in this chapter and check all that apply.)
 - Primary client
 - Facilitator(s): internal, external, small group, table
 - Project manager
 - Designer
 - Chair
 - Moderator
 - Planning group
 - Other:

4. What type of process or session is this? (See Table 1.1 for definitions of these eighteen types.)

<input type="checkbox"/> Annual general meeting	<input type="checkbox"/> Kickoff meeting
<input type="checkbox"/> Board meeting	<input type="checkbox"/> Roundtable
<input type="checkbox"/> Charrette	<input type="checkbox"/> Search conference
<input type="checkbox"/> Chartered forum	<input type="checkbox"/> Seminar
<input type="checkbox"/> Colloquium	<input type="checkbox"/> Summit
<input type="checkbox"/> Community conversation	<input type="checkbox"/> Symposium
<input type="checkbox"/> Conference	<input type="checkbox"/> Town hall meeting
<input type="checkbox"/> Consultation	<input type="checkbox"/> Think tank
<input type="checkbox"/> Forum	<input type="checkbox"/> Workshop

Completing a Preliminary Screen

Here are practical guidelines for making decisions about the elements often discussed by parties involved in an initial screen as outlined in Exhibit 1.1.

Coordinates: Date(s) and Location

First, determine what session date (or dates) will work with people's schedules.

- Ask what date would be attractive to the facilitator, to the designer, to the manager, and to potential workshop participants, and why.
- Think about the timing relative to what needs to be done. Does the proposed date allow enough preparation time for the participants and the planning committees?
- Ask whether other events going on at the proposed time might complement or conflict with this session. How close is the date to national, state or provincial, religious, or school holidays?

"Lean on your experience and trust yourself. Your social intelligence—the capacity to engage in satisfying and productive interpersonal relationships—is an important source of information" (Goleman, 2006, p. 82).

Also determine whether the client has identified a location, and if so, explore the possible implications of this location. It's also important to find out whether some steps will be done virtually.

Purpose, Objectives, and Deliverables

Consider at least these three questions about the purpose, objectives, and deliverables:

- Are they clear and specific, or is the client expecting that they will be clarified during the early part of the session?
- Can you anticipate the most obvious issues and questions that will be involved in managing the session with respect to participants, speakers, logistics, invitations, and essential documents (the elements discussed in Part Three)?
- If the deliverables have been defined, what does your experience tell you about the workload involved in managing a session with these deliverables?

Process Leadership

How a process is led has implications for how it is managed.

Process leadership comes in many shapes and sizes: it may include a client, a process consultant (facilitator and designer), a workshop manager, and two additional staff members to do logistics; it may involve just the client and a facilitator who are responsible for the entire session; or it may be just one person doing everything. Much depends on the size and complexity of the process.

The preliminary screen helps determine what decisions have been made or need to be made about the leadership functions in a process, as itemized below.

The *primary client* owns the challenge being addressed through a process. This person is usually the individual sponsoring the session and has decision-making authority for what happens before, during, and after a session (Strachan and Tomlinson, 2008, p. 49).

Given the considerable range of situations in which sessions happen, the primary client may be a committee chair, the president or chief executive officer of an organization, the senior manager of a department, the volunteer leader of a community group, or the members of a collaborative or network. Sometimes all the key roles for a process are carried by a single person: in this situation the primary client is also the designer, facilitator, manager, and sponsor for a session.

Be prepared to ask specific questions about the challenges that this process will be addressing. These questions might explore the relationship between the primary client and other clients, who your main contact person is, the relative urgency of the situation, and the nature of participants' needs and expectations.

One classic question is whether a session should be led by a *process consultant*, a *facilitator*, a *chair*, or a *moderator*, or someone who combines these functions. For example, an internal client may be thinking that a process consultant is required to design and facilitate a symposium. At the same time, an experienced facilitator might recognize that because symposiums typically have a large number of speakers and offer no time for small-group discussions, a credible chairperson is what is required. Has this decision been made, or are people still discussing what type of leadership needs to be in place given the session purpose, deliverables, and type?

Regardless of how large or small a session is, having a *planning* or *advisory group* of two or more people provides a range of perspectives on what to do when and why. Planning group members are also brought on board to build capacity for implementation.

Process Leadership Definitions

- *Chair or chairperson*: an appointed or elected person with positional authority.
- *Moderator*: a nonpartisan person who presides over a meeting.
- *Process consultant*: a person who designs and facilitates processes and also frequently manages them.
- *Facilitator*: a person who attends to group process. Many people do facilitation as a regular part of their work and yet don't think of themselves as professional facilitators; they are included in this definition.

Source: Adapted from Strachan and Tomlinson, 2008, p. 49.

Timely liaison knits together people fulfilling these leadership functions with a range of others, such as an organization's support staff, on-site employees, travel agents, audiovisual technicians, and conference and maintenance personnel. The devil is certainly in the details.

Eighteen Types of Processes

Clarify up front what type of process is being considered. Names of processes can be confusing as there is no single accepted taxonomy for process types. In the past, for example, the term *seminar* described a series of presentations followed by a brief opportunity for questions and answers. Today a *seminar* may include both presentations and small learning groups, and participants may experience both activities either in person or virtually.

Some organizations develop their own names for processes that are combinations of the eighteen types listed in Table 1.1. They may use terms such as *roundtable seminar* or *consultation workshop*. However, because different types of processes require different types of agreements, it's important to have everyone on the same page with respect to what is going to happen.

Most processes are held face to face or virtually, or both at the same time; some are conducted solely through on-line exchanges. The general rule is to decide what you want to accomplish and then explore the best ways to meet those outcomes. It is usually the process consultant, client, and members of the planning committee who decide together which meetings and sessions should be virtual, face to face, or in some combination thereof. This decision may be quite obvious at the outset. Table 1.1 describes the eighteen processes listed in Exhibit 1.1, related deliverables, and key features.

Sometimes it is easiest to determine what a session is *not*, and then to name it by looking at what is left.

Table 1.1
Types of Facilitated Processes

Process Type	Deliverables	Key Features
<p>1. <i>Annual general meeting (AGM)</i>. A regular session with board members and general members of a not-for-profit group or other organization; focus is primarily on reporting on the past year and voting on key decisions for the future; usually chaired rather than facilitated.</p>	<p>Updates; issues analysis; report; decisions on key agenda items, based on voting</p>	<p>Presentations enhance attendance or highlight business items or current issues.</p> <p>Often substantial audio-visual (AV) and technical support.</p>
<p>2. <i>Board meeting</i>. A regular meeting of an organization's board of directors (and often some members) focused on the policies and related decisions required to manage the business or program as described in the organization's strategic plan; usually chaired rather than facilitated.</p>	<p>Problem solving; policy development; strategic plan; ethical guidelines; decisions on strategic items, often with a confidential voting process</p>	<p>Room setup often an open rectangle.</p> <p>Presentations by informants for educational purposes.</p>
<p>3. <i>Charrette</i>. A facilitated, collaborative, intensive work session that usually takes place over several days and with all interested parties as participants (National Charrette Institute, 2008).</p>	<p>Problem identification and description; information sharing; consensus-based decision making focused on community ownership</p>	<p>Expert speakers as required to support decision making.</p> <p>A series of meetings and design sessions compressed into several days.</p>
<p>4. <i>Chartered forum</i>. A membership-based assembly of like-minded individuals (for example, professionals) who meet virtually or in person through a regular forum (for example, biannually) or on an ongoing basis to discuss, coordinate, and promote common issues and areas of interest; may be chaired or facilitated.</p>	<p>Issues identification; analysis and resolution; practice guidelines; sometimes involves consensus-based decision making</p>	<p>Guests and new members may be included.</p> <p>Speakers bring interesting perspectives on new issues and approaches.</p> <p>Presentation outlines support technical discussions and note taking.</p> <p>Virtual and real-time discussions in small groups and plenary sessions.</p>
<p>5. <i>Colloquium</i>. An academic conference or seminar of interested participants, focused on dialogue and conversation; usually chaired.</p>	<p>Knowledge transfer and exchange; networking; community development</p>	<p>Speakers with academic expertise.</p> <p>Discussions in plenary session and informal small groups: for example, standing around café tables during breaks.</p> <p>Copies of presentations often provided.</p>

Table 1.1
Types of Facilitated Processes, Cont'd.

Process Type	Deliverables	Key Features
<p>6. <i>Community conversation.</i> A discussion—often hosted over several meetings—that is focused on building or enhancing a space for belonging and accountability in a community; the emphasis is on the various gifts that participants bring in relation to the future rather than on past problems.</p>	<p>A community where people are committed and connected to each other and to a shared purpose</p>	<p>Setup usually a circle of movable chairs, without tables.</p> <p>Meeting space setup and aesthetics reflect the intention of the community participants want to create.</p>
<p>7. <i>Conference.</i> A large (usually) gathering that brings together people who want to hear about, learn, or discuss important matters in a specific area; usually chaired; may be designed by a process consultant or meeting planner.</p>	<p>Information sharing; networking; product promotion</p>	<p>Participation open and based on interest or by invitation to members or specific groups.</p> <p>Inspiring, high-quality presentations a key success factor.</p> <p>Both large plenary and smaller concurrent sessions at various times and places and in both virtual and real time.</p>
<p>8. <i>Consultation.</i> A facilitated workshop or longer process (for example, a series of workshops or focus groups) where participants are encouraged to advocate their points of view, advise, consult with one another, or be consulted by another party, or perform some combination of these tasks.</p>	<p>Information gathering; focused discussion; report; recommendations for action</p>	<p>Participation usually by invitation but may also be open to interested individuals and groups.</p> <p>Focus on hearing participants' opinions; decision making not involved.</p> <p>Speakers may enable discussion.</p> <p>Seating arranged to support maximum input; participant contact information important for follow-up purposes.</p>
<p>9. <i>Forum.</i> A formal meeting for public discussion; usually chaired; sometimes facilitated.</p>	<p>Structured discussion; issues exploration; networking; question generation</p>	<p>Participation open to interested parties or by invitation based on perspectives.</p> <p>Speakers, especially at the start.</p> <p>Room setup often theater style due to formality of session; usually involves a podium and microphone.</p>

(continued on next page)

Table 1.1**Types of Facilitated Processes, Cont'd.**

Process Type	Deliverables	Key Features
10. <i>Kickoff meeting.</i> An initial session of a longer project or process where the focus is on building enthusiasm and understanding for an agenda, key themes, or issues; often half a day or less; usually facilitated.	Commitment to and buy-in for an idea or project	Participation by invitation to a specific group. Motivational speakers usually featured. Themed giveaways, videos, and special effects frequently employed.
11. <i>Roundtable.</i> A facilitated or chaired workshop where expert invitees share equal influence and status; most roundtables process information on a subject with a view toward decision making at the conclusion of the process. (King Arthur and his chosen knights are said to have sat at a round table so that none would have preference [see, for example, Timeless Myths, 2008].)	Input to decision making; question generation; information sharing; creative thinking	Participants are experts, so few or no speakers required. Seating arrangement supports eye contact and equality of participants.
12. <i>Search conference.</i> A facilitated opportunity to discover common ground and imagine an ideal future; uses methods of discovery, analysis, and dialogue to broaden perspectives, expand horizons, and lead to committed action (Weisbord and others, 1992, p. xiii).	Decisions or recommendations on vision, strategic directions, community and network development, and next steps	Speakers may provide a focus for discussions that follow. Room layout corresponds to agenda; must support equitable and intensive discussion.
13. <i>Seminar.</i> A short (often a few hours), intensive course of study on a specific topic; often a meeting of specialists; usually small in size and chaired, not facilitated.	Informed speakers; knowledge transfer and exchange; critical reflection; presentation summaries	Participation based on interest or restricted by invitation. Speakers are a highlight and focus on a specific topic. Room setup often theater style.
14. <i>Summit.</i> A facilitated conference where leading people in a topic area meet to discuss and come to agreement on key considerations for the future.	Informed speakers; technical background documents; conclusions and recommendations	Participation by invitation to current or future leaders in a field. High-profile speakers usually featured.

Table 1.1**Types of Facilitated Processes, Cont'd.**

Process Type	Deliverables	Key Features
15. <i>Symposium</i> . An opportunity to learn from experts and discuss ideas with colleagues over a day or more; may, for example, be set up as a weeklong study tour focused on a specific topic; frequently chaired rather than facilitated.	Summary of expert presentations; problem solving; networking; report	Participation by invitation to a profession or based on interest. Speakers a key part of the agenda. Room setup usually theater style.
16. <i>Town hall meeting</i> . A facilitated, open, informal gathering where general presentations are made and views on a subject are explored; usually half a day or less.	Background documents; exploration of ideas and approaches	Participation focuses on a specific community. Speakers usually leaders with accountability related to the topic. Room setup often informal; requires AV support for special presentations.
17. <i>Think tank</i> . A gathering where a group of experts, key informants, or opinion leaders provide advice and ideas on a specific topic; usually facilitated.	Collaborative, creative thinking on an important topic; new ideas and options for action rather than decisions	Participation by invitation to people with expertise. Speakers spark discussion and encourage creativity and innovation. Tools for working together creatively, such as poster walls and markers, may be used.
18. <i>Workshop</i> . A facilitated process with a specific purpose for a limited time period: for example, a few hours, a day, a weekend, or a week; participants are actively involved in doing work focused on outcomes.	Conclusions, recommendations, or decisions related to objectives; report	Effective room and group setups vary considerably; tables for taking notes helpful in some situations.

Decision Making After the Screen

The preliminary screening is an opportunity to assess the overall fit between what needs to be done with whom and to determine how people might work together to accomplish what needs to be done. This is the time to pause and reflect before making a decision about agreeing to the work. What are your thoughts and feelings telling you? Should this preliminary discussion move to the development of an agreement or not?

Recognize your preferences. What kind of work do you like to do with what kind of people? If you value a strong focus on productivity tempered by some humor, are you likely to find that combination in this project? At this stage in your career or business can you afford to be choosy about what work you take on, or do you need to take whatever comes your way?

Clarify the give-get. Agreeing to manage a facilitated process involves a service exchange. The more clarity you have about what is being exchanged, the better everyone involved will feel about the final result. If you volunteer, or *give*, your services to manage a half-day workshop on climate change, then your *get* may be that you are making a difference in an area where you have a strong commitment. If you are managing a large conference in exchange for payment of your fees and expenses, then it's important that you think the exchange is a fair one financially.

When an exchange is not balanced, the process may become tainted. For example, you may come to resent doing so much volunteer work that it affects your lifestyle, or you may regret not getting enough payment for work that turns out to be more time consuming than expected. These feelings may leak into your interactions with others and affect the quality of your work.

Anticipate the learning curve. Be realistic about what you can do now and what you need to learn to do. It's unfair to expect that you can learn on someone else's nickel when it is clear that they are paying for a specified level of expertise that they think you already possess. Some initiatives require more learning than others. If a client or facilitator wants a session to reflect emerging technologies, do you have the experience and expertise to make that happen without a lot of additional research into unfamiliar territory?

Specify who gets the work and who does it. In some companies the people who contract for the work are not the people who actually do the work. If you are talking to someone who impresses you with his or her experience, educational background, and enthusiasm for a project, ask specific questions about who will be working with you on what. Will you relate directly to the person who designs and facilitates the session? Who will be your ongoing liaison?

Be seduced at your peril. Take time to think about the information the screening has provided. If this work has appeared through a request for a proposal, there is usually time to mull things over. If it comes to your attention through a phone call, it's easy to be instantly sold on the opportunity—

whether it's the topic, the people, your budget, or the location—so that you want to say “yes!” on the spot.

Mulling the prospect over for a few hours or a day can bring some distance and insight to your decision. For example, you may really want to work in Hawaii for a week but not have any time at all to do the preparation required. Or you may be totally committed to taking on another large conference focused on your pet issue, but it may be bigger than you and your colleagues can manage.

Communicating a Decision

Whether the answer is yes or no, an initial contact may lead to the beginning of a productive relationship or the end of an exploratory discussion. Examples 1.1 and 1.2 offer some samples to assist you with these efforts.



Example 1.1

When the Client's Answer Is Yes

This note is a sample of a positive response from a client to a process consultant who submitted a proposal to arrange several upcoming planning sessions for the client.

Dear [Consultant name]:

I am pleased to confirm that your submission to manage, design, and facilitate our upcoming planning sessions has been successful. We had several applications from qualified suppliers and after much discussion we concluded that your company has just what we need to support dynamic and insightful discussions and decision making, as well as efficient logistics for this project.

We would like to follow through on your work plan, which indicated that your first opportunity to meet the planning group for this project is in three weeks' time on May 15. If this time frame is still suitable, would it be convenient for you to meet everyone at 9:00 a.m. in our boardroom to initiate this process?

Please let me know, and I will set everything up at my end.

Best regards,

[Client name]

Don't burn your bridges: you may need to cross these rivers again.

Example 1.2

When Your Answer Is No

This communication is a sample of a facilitation firm's negative response to a potential client after a preliminary meeting in which the client didn't meet the firm's expectations.

Dear [Client name]:

Thank you for meeting with us yesterday regarding the development of a forum on car safety issues for children.

Based on our experience and the additional information you provided about the nature of this initiative and the support you can provide, I sense that a better fit between client and consultant would ensure a more successful outcome for you. As a result, we regret to inform you that we are withdrawing our proposal for this project.

I appreciate your consideration of our company's services and wish you all the very best with respect to this initiative.

Sincerely,

[Consultant name]