

Growing a New Organization: Giving All and Letting Go

How ICA Colleagues Helped to Launch and Support the International Association of Facilitators (IAF)

By Sunny Walker and Beret Griffith, June 2004

On Monday morning, January 16, 1994, in a small hotel ballroom in Alexandria, Virginia, the remnant crew of an energizing weekend conference (others had left early due to an impending ice storm) gave their official endorsement to launch a new organization. Seventy-three people, in true facilitator style, walked up to a flip chart, picked up a marker and signed their names, pledging to pay the first year's annual dues. They had wrestled with the name: International Association of Facilitation or International Association of Facilitators, settling on the latter. It was to be an organization of and about people.

Most, though not all, who signed on that day were current and former staff of the Institute of Cultural Affairs. A motivated few worked hard over the next six months and that summer, the IAF was officially registered in the State of Minnesota as a 501(c)6, a trade member association. And the rest, you might say, is history.

The IAF wasn't even a glimmer in anyone's eye in 1984 when ICA colleagues working outside the ICA began meeting and "Sharing Approaches that Work," a term coined by the ICA. In October of 1987 twenty-seven people responded to an inquiry about interest in meeting to research and become familiar with innovative group facilitation methods. It wasn't until nearly two years later, in January of 1989, when a group of people showed up in Dallas to explore creating a loose-knit "association" of people using ICA methods in their professional activities. In December of 1989 sixty-seven people met, including two people from outside the US, and began calling themselves, The ICA Network Association (ICAN). Over the next four years, the group grew in numbers and began to create the framework for what was would eventually to become the IAF. People were interested establishing credibility as facilitators; developing a means of interchange; bringing spirit methods into facilitation work; ensuring quality in facilitation; conducting focused research; looking at the components of organization transformation; launching facilitator certification and training and... imagining the future of facilitation. In 1991, buzz began about forming an official association for facilitators.

And so we ask now, besides some colleagues with a good idea who were also willing to do some initial legwork, just what was the ICA's contribution to the IAF? Clearly, the ICA-related founding members of IAF were steeped in ICA's understanding that true participation is key to effective group process results. ICA colleagues were part of a mighty band often referred to as "Those Who Care." The ICAN conference in 1994 that launched the IAF was the seventh or eighth in a series of "facilitator" gatherings and included many aspects of the imagined future association—polity, future conferences, finances, membership. To move away from traditional kinds of organizations, the group functioning as the Board of Directors named themselves the Association Coordinating Team or ACT.

As with many new organizations, ACT members were excited and swept up in the energy surrounding the fledgling organization. Many paid their way to interim meetings over the next several years of growing and nourishing the IAF. Most people who made up the initial IAF leadership had a long ICA

history. They struggled with “best practices” for conducting meetings that were full of other facilitators (the old “herding cats” syndrome). In good facilitator fashion ACT turned to a facilitator outside of the leadership team to facilitate ACT meetings—yes, another ICA facilitator. This has almost become an ongoing tradition.

Over the past ten years, critical new pieces of the IAF puzzle have been carried by those with an ICA background: Among the past Chairs of the Association are Sue Laxdal, Bob Vance, Mirja Hanson, Gary Forbes, and Jo Nelson. Maureen Jenkins is the current Chair-Elect. Beret Griffith and Jean Watts were instrumental in launching the *Facilitation News* (newsletter), *Group Facilitation: A Research & Applications Journal*, and the popular research Think Tanks. Many past and current executive team members and task force chairs have come from ICA ranks. Past conference co-chairs who were at one time staff of ICA include Kim Aire Epley and Sunny Walker (1995), David Rick Walters (1996), Beret Griffith (1998), Sherwood and Eunice Shankland (1999), Bill Staples (2000), Sue Laxdal and Elsa Batica (2001). Many other ICA colleagues and folks from the ToP Trainers Network worked as IAF conference co-chairs, served on *Facilitation News* and *Group Facilitation* editorial boards, helped to organize and/or have presented at IAF conferences around the world, were instrumental in starting regional facilitation groups, led organizational strategic planning, and chaired annual implementation task forces. Many and have played various other supportive roles for the IAF.

And from time to time, the ICA as an institution has served as an official partner, co-sponsoring a conference or working on a key area such as the Facilitator Competencies that have become the backbone of IAF Facilitator Certification. The IAF continues to grow and work to find and maintain the balance between effective participation of interested members and effective business management of what has become a large and often unwieldy group. ICA colleagues will continue to roll up their sleeves and be a part of continuing to build the IAF which now has over more than 1300 members in over twenty countries.

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