

A Brief History of *Grp-Facl* and its Antecedents

The Electronic Discussion on Group Facilitation:

Process Expertise for Group Effectiveness

By Gordon Harper

This electronic discussion on group facilitation was originally established as the UseNet Newsgroup, misc.business.facilitators (mbf), which was created on February 3, 1995.

Approximately one year later, on January 2, 1996, the electronic mailing list, Grp-Facl (gf), was made public and "gatewayed" with the newsgroup. At that time mbf/gf also shifted to "moderation," which allowed a moderator to screen out irrelevant submissions.

For those interested in more history, read on.

Misc.business.facilitators (mbf) was organized as a Usenet Newsgroup through the efforts of Mary Margaret Palmer over many months starting in 1994. On February 3, 1995, the official "control message" creating the newsgroup was sent out to all Usenet News sites. Once in operation the group quickly realized that the name, "misc.business.facilitators," attracted a great number of inappropriate posts pertaining to topics such as:

- "Will facilitate hot deals on precious metals from China"
- "Our software will facilitate your direct sales (by sending unsolicited bulk email to unsuspecting thousands)"
- "More new sources to facilitate venture capital for budding entrepreneurs."

Those who bushwacked through these "weeds" found the discussion about group facilitation to be very worthwhile. We also found that a good number of our posts focused on what we could do to eliminate the "weeds."

After Usenet's obligatory six month waiting period, Mary Margaret initiated the request to shift the newsgroup to moderated status. At the same time, Sandy Schuman initiated the creation of an electronic mailing list, Grp-Facl (gf), sponsored by the University at Albany. On January 2, 1996, mbf shifted to moderated status and was simultaneously gatewayed to gf, making it possible for people to participate in a single, moderated discussion through either technology. In the spring of 1999 the institution which had been hosting the gateway ceased to do so; the newsgroup was orphaned and terminated. However, the archives (March 1995 - December 1999), are available in a Google Group.

In the spring of 1997 the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) adopted mbf/gf as its official on-line discussion group and became its co-sponsor. Soon thereafter a companion website was developed to make available additional resources to subscribers

By mid-'98 the number of subscribers had reached 800, fluctuated for a time between the mid 800s and low 900s, and is currently about 1000. In 2005 "mirrors" of the discussion were established on Google Groups and Yahoo Groups. In 2007 *Grp-Facl* averaged 975 subscribers in 37 countries with an average of three posts per day.

These statistics say nothing of the high quality of this group. Thanks to all of you for making this discussion superb!

- *Sandy*

Sandor Schuman, Moderator, Center for Policy Research

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Electronic Communications - What?

Pre-misc.business.facilitators/grp-fac

On Thu, January 3, 2008, Gordon Harper wrote:

When we met for the first time "officially" as the IAF in January of 1994, it was clear to many of us that electronic communications would be crucial to the success of our new venture. I was appalled to discover, however, that a majority of our members had neither an organizational nor an individual email address. For the people gathered at that meeting--primarily past or current ICA staff and ToP trainers at that time--email was still viewed as something of an esoteric mystery understood only by the Geek Squad.

I'd just returned to the US from sixteen years in Asia with ICA. We'd been using email since 1985 to link our work on organizational transformation across a number of Asian countries. We'd come over the succeeding years to depend on it for staying wired together, along with newsgroups, electronic bulletin boards (BBS), etc. I'd been something of a flaming evangel in those early days for getting all our offices connected across Asia, and it appeared that I was going to have to do the same for my colleagues in the US.

If one doesn't have memory of that moment in time fourteen years ago, it's probably hard to imagine just how strange and complex email seemed to people who were then new to it. We set up a room at the IAF meetings just for introducing people to email and getting them signed up for a service right then and there. It was of course entirely dial up, and we had to string a phone line to the room and my laptop to make this work. I found myself spending all my round the edges time at both that and the next year's meeting subscribing my colleagues to an email service.

Many of the IAF members from that era will recall the fear and fascination they first experienced with this new technology. Our ISP of choice during these formative years for the Association was the Institute for Global Communications (formerly EcoNet). I probably worked with forty or fifty of our group during that two year period, going through the process of signing them up for a personal email address that ended in @igc.org. I'm always delighted today to run into colleagues who still retain that domain name as one of their functioning email addresses (as I do), fourteen years later, despite its having been absorbed over the subsequent years, first by Mindspring and then Earthlink.

Getting people cajoled, badgered and guided into having email was obviously the sine qua non for any ongoing electronic communications among the members. Then the question arose, at our '94 Conference, about an IAF newsgroup, for email messages to quickly reach everyone. Mike Kirkwood and I were the two members of the original ACT Team assigned the task of

coming up with the first member database system and the first electronic communications network. Mike took on the former enterprise, I the latter.

I sited the system we initially used, during all of 1994 and well into 1995, with Topica.com, then one of the major providers of such services. (Despite the acronymic similarities, this service had nothing organizationally to do with either ToP or ICA. It was, however, the provider I used to create a number of national and international ICA and ToP trainer lists during those years.) We quickly developed a Topica list for all IAF members with email capabilities following our 1994 Conference and added new ones as people developed those capabilities over the next couple years. I developed another Topica list for the internal communications of our Association Coordinating Team (ACT).

In addition to signing members up to email services, I found myself doing workshops at our conferences in those early years both on ToP methods (for ICA) and on how to use email and the listservs. These latter were always jammed with people--indeed, I recall one that you and I did together, Sandy, probably '96 or '97, with a substantial crowd still desperate to get some handles on this arcane science.

It was indeed Mary Margaret who proposed, I think at our 1995 conference, that we expand our members list to include a wider group of facilitators. She was at the time in the process of creating misc.business.facilitators and offered to make it available to us once it was fully registered and operational. As you point out, this shift did occur, I think mid 1995, and we moved our networking from Topica to it. By that time, I was more than ready to give up my vast powers as listowner of the IAF groups and was turning my attention and energy to developing the first ICA US website.

Both these early attempts at linking ourselves together would seem creaky and problematic today, and Grp-Facl has indeed now long been the answer to our prayers. Still, those were heady days, when it was apparent that we were pioneering in new systems for information sharing, collaborative planning and effective action. It makes one wonder what technologies we are on the cusp of today that will seem quite natural and even routine fourteen years hence.

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