

THE TEETH OF FACILITATION

OR: When is Standing Up Like Falling Down?

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based on a talk given to the Minnesota Facilitators Network, 1995

Facilitators do a lot of standing during the performance of their services. What really, though, do facilitators stand for? That is a question that haunts me from time to time as I serve my clients in seemingly endless meetings. Some of our clients ask us to help them because they think we can bring some objectivity to their situation. Is this really true?

During a recent interview on Minnesota Public Radio I was asked, "What does it mean that organizations need outside objective facilitators?" I forget how I answered the question, but the more I have been thinking about it since, the more I realize there is no such thing as an outside objective facilitator. We really do not have much more objectivity than the groups we work.

So, what does it mean to come in from "the outside" with some sort of impartiality to mediate among conflicting interests to try to reach a consensus? The new science world-view has made it clear that there are no such things as objective observers who do not in some way "interfere" with what they are observing. The same holds true for facilitators; however "neutral" we try to be, we can't help but influence the situation we're facilitating.

Therefore it is a myth to think that as facilitators we can come into a situation with objectivity in the sense that we do not stand for something. Facilitators stand for something. We can't help not to. I want to share what I think it is as the profession of facilitation that we stand for as we work with our clients and our own organizations.

Last year I got a letter from a colleague in Indiana who is a new facilitator. I had been mentoring him as he was learning this skill. He asked, "Have you ever had the experience of having facilitated a group, and it really went great. Everyone thought you did wonderfully. They came away with much consensus and a new vision, but you felt depressed?"

I thought, "This guy is crazy." What do you mean, "You felt depressed?" His question bothered me. I think it was because I identified with him a little bit more than I was willing to admit. It began to get clearer the day I picked up my wife after she had facilitated a session for the National Runaway Hotline Network. They were having a conference in Chicago. I could sense equal portions of euphoria and melancholy begin filling my wife, if you can have both of those experiences simultaneously.

I asked, "How did it go?" She exclaimed, "It went great! They got more done than they thought they would, and we finished an hour early." I said, "That's tremendous." Then

melancholy fell over her, and I said, "Well, then, what's wrong?" She said, "They think they did it themselves!"

Somewhere in her response I began to sense she had stumbled on to a profound secret about facilitation. We stand for something as facilitators. Now the trick is to stand for something so transparently that you do not disrupt their own process. How do you become the invisible rock in the middle of the table that will be the point around which the group can have guidance?

Let me share with you what I think are four features of what we stand for that enables our clients to achieve stunning results.

I. FACILITATORS HAVE A WORLD-VIEW THAT SHAPES THEIR APPROACH

This is rather obvious. Everyone has a world-view that shapes whatever it is that one is doing. Margaret Wheatley's book, *Leadership and the New Science*,¹ has provided language to help us to understand how the world in which we operate influences the way organizations function. Also, how leaders and facilitators work with organizations.

One of those things that is central is the whole point of the interconnectedness of all things. Simply put, it's the notion of unity; life fundamentally is about unity. I always get a charge when I can enable people with seemingly different self-interests discover they share a lot of common ground. Facilitators know that the unity is already there in the beginning but our job is to make it become clearly apparent to everyone.

There is a story in the book *Government Works*² from Miami's municipal government about their Labor Management Committees. Miami has the 911 emergency phone system. The norm is that 911 response time optimally is three minutes, with four minutes being tolerable. There are some sections in Miami, though, where the average is seven minutes and longer.

There the emergency response system is assigned to the firefighters and ambulances. They assigned a Labor Management Committee to go to work in figuring out how these areas of the city could have faster response time. They looked at this issue in depth. In those areas that are seven minutes or longer there are fire stations, but all they have is a "pumper," which is a rather small fire truck.

The idea that the Labor Management Committee came up was that they would install on the pumper the basic life support equipment that is normally an ambulance. Then they would take two firefighters assigned to that firehouse and upgrade their skills to be paramedics. That way they could either be firefighters or paramedics, whatever the situation required. It seemed like an obvious idea to them.

Well, it violated the union contract. It violated the city ordinance. It violated all sorts of management policies and procedures. But it was something that the Labor

Management Team came together and said, "This is what we believe will work." They advocated pretty hard that they were in this together. They conducted a pilot and finally won the necessary approval to have their plan adopted citywide. It took an Act of the Almighty, it seemed, to get it through.

One thing we are discovering is that the blinder of the adversarial presuppositions - between labor and management, between employees and bosses, and so forth - prevents us from seeing wholes. I think facilitators have to be particularly mindful of that and to note that those blinders are in everyone. Ellie Haydock, who is their internal facilitator, said labor management committees are like marriages, "You give a little, take a little, and every now and then remind each other that you really need each other to be together." I think there is a new kind of paradigm coming is this whole business about labor management. Part of it is because there is a facilitator like Ellie for the labor management committee process in Miami. She stood firm and enabled them to see what the situation needed. She got them beyond just their knee-jerk blinders about adversarial relationships.

II. The second point is that **FACILITATORS ARE CONCERNED WITH IMAGE CHANGE**. Actually, **FACILITATORS ARE CONCERNED WITH CHANGING PEOPLES LIVES**, but the way you change someone's life is to change the images out of which they operate.

My heroine for this idea is Belle in the story of Beauty and the Beast. Belle saw transparently the beauty in the beast. Her faith and her trust enabled the Beast to transform himself. That is the role of the facilitator: to love the greatness in the midst of the ugliness so that the ugliness can be transformed by itself.

I work in the public sector a lot. There is a rampant victim image by many public servant workers in government. Part of it comes out of the fact that they've come to think that a job in the government is an entitlement. It's the idea that if you cannot do anything else, you can work for government. This was not always the case, but now it seems that there is a tremendous amount of victimization by people who work in government.

A couple of years ago I was working with the Chicago Department on Aging facilitating a strategic planning workshop. At one point in the planning process, we looked at the root causes to issues. The previous session on the vision had gone well. When we came to the obstacles, though, and we tried to dig for root causes, it got really tough for the group. I would ask, "What are the obstacles, the impediments blocking the realization of your vision?" To the biggest cluster of items that they had, I asked, "Now what is the central theme of this cluster?" They were coming up with titles like, "competing outside influences," "indifferent external factors". As I listened, I could hear them saying to themselves, "The reason we can't do our job is that somebody else out there. There was management; there was the political environment. It was like if they

could just get rid of everyone outside themselves, they would be okay. "Since the world is the way it is, there is nothing we can do about this," they seem to be saying.

Facilitators know that if a group thinks that their problems are outside their control, then they are not going to come up with any creative strategies to deal with them. So you have to push and probe.

We, as human beings, unwittingly participate in perpetuating the very things that hold us back from our greatness. It seems like we, unknowingly or not, unintentionally support those things that hold us back. It is only when we recognize how it is that we maintain the very problems that hold us back, are we then free to move forward.

Here I asked, "How do you perpetuate these 'indifferent external factors'? How do you go about supporting these 'competing outside influences'?" Well, they got really angry! They did not see how it was that even calling them "outsiders" was part of the problem. It was painful. It was group spirit surgery. Until a group can own up to the fact that they participate in supporting the problem, then they cannot be moving toward their future.

You know what the Bible says, "The truth will set you free." First it will piss you off, but it will set you free.

III. The third thing for me is FACILITATORS EMBRACE AMBIGUITY AND PARADOX AS GIVEN, AS THE WAY LIFE IS.

When you design an event you are going to facilitate you are mindful of balancing content and process, the product and the method, because, Marshall McLuhan was right, "The medium is the message." Our facilitation methodology is what we have to say. How do we facilitate in such a fashion that no matter the topic, the group experiences a profound happening in the midst of their deliberations? Maintaining balance is one way.

Balancing and embracing other kinds of paradoxes and ambiguities is critical: for example, the individual and the group. Take any group you work with and you begin to realize it is not a group; there is no group there. All there is a collection of radically diverse individuals. This is just tremendous that we got this number of human beings sitting in those chairs. There is not a group there, but many unique and unrepeatable human beings. And yet - simultaneously - there is no such thing as some individuals there. Our relationships to the people around us define who we are. There is no individual identity that is separate from being related to someone else. If it was not for the group, there would be no set of individuals. How do you balance that?

We are going to be discovering that increasing the amount of diversity in organizations is for its own good. I have not seen any studies yet, but I know they are going to be

coming up with them. We are beginning to see this in terms of change and leadership processes. When you increase the level of diversity, you are going to be able to add to the kinds of perspectives, the dynamics, and so on. Those organizations that do not embrace diversity are going to be left behind. Facilitation enables organizations to embrace diversity.

Other kinds of paradoxes that facilitators embrace: past and present, past and future, present and future. Part of what we try to do in strategic planning is to mediate a dialogue between the past and the future.

Another kind of paradox is the "universal and the particular." "How does this global problem show up in this group? How is this local issue manifested around the world?" These are the kinds of question that we as facilitators keep asking.

Another one is spirit and matter. One chapter in *Government Works*³ is an interview I had with Carolyn Lukensmeyer, who was on the staff of Governor Celeste in Ohio. She went on to be one of the facilitators for President Clinton's two cabinet retreat. You may have heard about the first one because the media accused them of doing a lot of touchy-feely stuff.

As Carolyn indicated in the interview, one has to be very careful in our society right now about what is politically correct. The historic separation between the church and that state has really got us confused. Nowadays, we think that it is not appropriate to talk about spirituality, to talk about the spirit of the group. And yet at the same time, in facilitation, we know that the intangibles are as important as the tangibles, frequently more so.

Yet, you can't talk about these things, certainly not in the political sphere. Carolyn talked about how they tried throughout the retreat to ensure that the Cabinet of the President of the United States talked about those things that really mattered at a deep, profound level. This was in order to create the kind of trust and rapport that is necessary to be a team.

These things are important, keeping our eye on all these things and maintaining the balance in the midst of the ambiguity.

IV. The fourth point: FACILITATORS LIVE OUT OF AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK. Again, this is somewhat obvious. We all have ethical frameworks. It's the posture we take in relating to our organizations that hire us.

For example, one element in my framework is that every group that I work for has a valuable contribution to make to society. I assume that from the beginning. They may now know it; they may not even be clear about what it is; but every organization is of value to the larger society.

There's a story in Participation Works4 about a company in Guatemala called Metacentros. It had done great at creating Super Mercados - big open air shopping malls - and had saturated the urban areas. Then they came up with a great strategy. They held a strategic planning session with their employees who came with up doing something comparable but in a smaller scale and in the rural areas. They began creating Super Mercados - the rural version - in the hinterlands of the nation of Guatemala. They discovered in so doing that they began to improve the local economy of every place they went. They saw that they were doing the economic development of a nation. They did not know that at first, but that discovery gave them a great sense of courage knowing they are helping to build a nation.

One thing that came clear to me is that every organization and every company is in the business of providing service to society. In fact, if you just take that notion a little further, if a company were not serving society's needs, it would not be in business in the first place. It's a matter of finding what the needs are and servicing them.

Every business is in the business of serving society. It's not in the business of making a profit. Profit is a measurement of how well a company is serving society. In other words, "Is there excess revenue after expenses?" That's a measure; that's not its purpose. There are things we call "for profit" corporations and "not-for-profit" corporations. In the nonprofit, which I'm all too familiar with, we think if we're broke, we're doing something good. Nothing further could be the truth. I'm not talking about making zillions of dollars so that all of the executives can fly around in private planes. The point is that the paradigm of "for-profit" and "not-for-profit" has put us in a trick bag. Every organization is of value to the larger society. Facilitating a business retreat is as fulfilling and can have as much long-range impact as serving a homeless shelter. It depends on how you see it.

In putting together the International Association of Facilitators, the conversation that always comes up every year is, "Shall we 'certify' facilitators?" We go through all the pros and cons every time. The bottom line is that it's your clients that certify you. If you are not asked back, that's society's way of sending you a message.

The past of every organization is the foundation for its future. Enable them to cherish it, embrace it, honor it. Not be bound to it or attached to it, but to be used as a lever to the future. And every organization's future is wide open. Like Miami's Labor Management Committee, they can deal with anything. Enable them to think creatively about the future. Every person in that organization has and is an important contributor to that environment, to that organization. This is fundamental to quality brainstorming.

For example, if the Klu Klux Klan asked me to facilitate their strategic planning retreat, I would have to give it due consideration. In others words, ask yourself, "What would it mean to try to go in as a facilitator, as the so-called "objective outside other," with your values and your ethical posture and try to do something to the imagination of those people?" A facilitator in the context I am talking about is asking, "Is there an

opportunity here? In what conditions would it make sense? Would this be something I would consider?" If you believe that some organizations are worth more than others, you have no business helping either kind. Every organization has the possibility of service.

Think about this as you understand yourself as a person who goes into organizations and tries to find the greatness within it. This facilitation profession is a profession with teeth. It is not something that is an amby-pamby, loosey-goosey sort of thing. Good facilitators know what it is that they are about when they work with an organization. Whether it is their client, or maybe it is their own company; they have a standing ground.

One way to know if you - as a facilitator - are standing for anything during a seminar is when you start to get the feeling you're falling apart. Certainty is the enemy of effective facilitation. Following a predetermined set of procedures without any flexibility is a sure sign you're more attached to you own ideas of what the client needs rather than allowing - transparently - and sometimes quite mysteriously - the organization to transform itself.

So, if you ever get that rush of euphoria tempered with the gloom of melancholy, you might be standing right where you need to be – on the solid rock of ethical facilitation. There is a very thin line between being confused and facilitating with integrity. If there weren't, you'd be off track.

ENDNOTES

¹ Wheatley, Margaret J. *Leadership and the New Science*. 1993. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

² Troxel, James P. *Government Works: Profiles of People Making a Difference*. 1995. Alexandria, VA: Miles River Press.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Troxel, James P. *Participation Works: Business Case From Around the World*. 1993. Alexandria, VA: Miles River Press.