Affirmative Facilitation

An Asset-Based Approach to Process Consultation

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Summary: **Affirmative facilitation** is a visionary approach to group process that shifts the focus from fixing organizational deficiencies to uncovering and utilizing existing **internal assets**. This methodology is grounded in **image theory**, suggesting that a group's collective mental picture of its future directly determines its current behavior and success. Unlike traditional expert consultants who diagnose problems from the outside, affirmative facilitators act as partners who empower communities to become their own **agents of change**. By integrating concepts like **appreciative inquiry** and the **internal locus of control**, this practice encourages participants to build upon their inherent strengths and creative potential. The goal is to foster a **paradigm shift** where organizations move toward positive growth by embracing their latent capacities rather than dwelling on their perceived flaws.

The purpose of this handbook is to provide those engaged in the field of facilitation with the best practice wisdom from some of its leading professional experts and practitioners. Drawing on and organized around the International Association of Facilitators' own Foundational Facilitation Competencies statement, this handbook has sought to provide its readers with original chapters that represent the best thinking, practices, and tools regarding group process facilitation.

The final part of this book has been tasked with describing the interior qualities that comprise the facilitator's external style. Underlying all quality facilitation is the fundamental belief in the affirmation of life. Facilitators cannot effectively engage in group process unless they believe in the inherent capacity of the group they are working with to be its own best change agents.

This chapter seeks to understand this unique characteristic of facilitators-their grasp that all good facilitation is fundamentally affirmative in nature. This affirmative approach, applied to the group process in both community and organizational planning, can be a breath of life and renewal for communities and residents who are all too

accustomed to being talked down to instead of listened to, as well as organizations whose employees are all too often ignored by top management. It is a radical departure from the traditional consultant-as-expert approach to organization and community development.

This chapter describes a paradigm shift from deficiency- to potency-based models and methods. It contrasts expert consulting with process consulting and describes the tenets and applications of affirmative facilitation. The new paradigm is a visionary, empowering frame of reference that underlies a philosophy of positive change for organizations, systems, and communities.

Affirmative facilitation rests on the fundamental belief that the keys to the transformation of a community or an organization are already present (however latent) within the system in question rather than external to it. These keys are the images the members carry within themselves of their own inherent capacities and of the potential of the situation they find themselves in. Facilitation approaches then focus on uncovering or discovering those images, making them manifest to the organization or community in order to be recognized, harvested, and used as building blocks for the system's future.

The philosophy of affirmative facilitation holds that our communities and organizations have infinite capacities as centers of creativity and incubators of hope – gifts to humanity and all of history. Organizations in particular were invented as a solution to a social problem; companies were created to meet an economic or social need. Recovering the organization's essential nature is a key to forecasting its future.

Affirmative facilitation is predicated on the tenets of image theory, introduced by Polack (1973) and Boulding (1966). Image theory posits that it is the images or mental pictures that in fact determine the current behavior of any individual or organization. The image acts as a field, a sphere of behavioral influence. Behavior consists of gravitating toward the most highly valued part of the field. Also contained within image theory is the notion that the way we observe a situation determines what we observe. (Chapter Twenty-Four explains image theory in more detail.)

BACKGROUND OF AFFIRMATIVE FACILITATION

Affirmative Facilitation is located within the field of organization development (OD), a subset of organizational behavior. OD as a discipline started in the 1940s and 1950s. Its founders looked to the medical model as their metaphorical prototype. OD professionals conducted an examination of problems and dysfunctions using a needs assessment and then applied treatment that they determined most appropriate. Just as a physician considered his patient to be sick, the OD professional considered a client organization or community to be disadvantaged or dysfunctional. On diagnosis, an intervention was performed with the purpose of healing the client.

Frustrated with simply being diagnosticians, OD professionals developed the practice of process consultation, which focused more on the people side of the consultation. Classically espoused in the works of Schein (especially *Process Consultation Revisited,* 1999), this model is based on consultation as a helping relationship. The mutual nature of this relationship, with the consultant working with and not for the client, is key to the process consultation philosophy.

Problem-Focused Consultation versus People-Oriented Consultation

Process consultation is generally contrasted with expert consultation. In practice, however, almost all management consulting involves a mix of both models, with the consultant frequently shifting roles to meet the needs of the situation.

Too often in the field of community and organization development, consultants carry a worldview underpinned by the deficiency model. Problem-focused consultants go into a community or organization assuming that they will find what is lacking and what is needed. They learn about the problems through interviews, focus groups, and brainstorming sessions. They develop action plans for their clients. They tell their clients what they are doing wrong. They propose to provide the solution or "fix" (called an intervention), such as a new software solution, a reengineered business process, or a new training module. Although this is a caricature, it makes the point that all too often, this type of thinking is indicative of the deficiency-based worldview of an outside professional consultant.

Simply conducting a workshop that asks community and organizational members what their needs are sends the message that the people and their situation are needy and deficient in some way. Although techniques of process consultation are being employed, the style of people-oriented consultation is not.

The fundamental difference between expert consulting versus process consulting has to do with the images the consultant has of the community or organization. Simply put, is their cup half-full or half empty? The consultant's already-held image of the organization determines her behavior. Seeing the organization as half-full propels the consultant to figure out how to release the potential that is there, however obscure and latent. The half-empty approach leads one to make interventions because the situation one is dealing with lacks something that the expert consultant needs to bring. The first is about empowering people; the second is about keeping people victimized, however unintentionally, and dependent on circumstances and influences outside themselves.

In people-based process consultation, the consultant maintains the belief that the group holds the keys to its future. To do this, the consultant works with all members of the organization or community to identify what they are already doing well. Consultants allow participants in the change process to accent their strengths and emphasize what they want rather than presupposing what is best and then telling them. People-focused consultation does not ignore problems; it strives to bring about their resolution by helping clients build on their strengths and potential while at the same time looking at the issues, challenges, and threats. The consultant helps the group imagine viable future scenarios, select the most appropriate ones, and implement them. A people-oriented consultant does not make interventions but rather releases the latent power of the organization or the community to be their own change agents.

The practice of facilitation is partially an extension of process consultation; affirmative facilitation is the next step in the evolution of this field. Before examining

affirmative facilitation in depth, it is instructive to view two parallel people-oriented consulting developments.

Appreciative Inquiry

A breakthrough parallel to affirmative facilitation in OD practice is appreciative inquiry. In the 1980s, Cooperrider and his associates at Case Western Reserve University conducted pioneer work with the Cleveland Clinic and the GTE Corporation in the areas of organizational theory and development (1999). Cooperrider came to believe in the self-fulfilling prophecy with regard to organizations, in other words, that an organization's image of itself is what works toward manifesting change. If its employees believe their organization is vibrant, then they will work toward maintaining and enhancing that vibrancy.

As Cooperrider and others developed the methodology of appreciative inquiry, they established an organizational theory of affirmation, which the tenets of affirmative facilitation parallel. They saw that organizations have in their history, mission, employees, and operations positive elements that can be identified and then used to develop the organization. An organization's vision of itself and the rest of the world is the key to its overall well-being. "Envisioning provocative new futures for an organization relies upon the assumption that human systems…exhibit an observable and largely automatic tendency to evolve in the direction of positive anticipatory images of the future" (Cooperrider, 1990, p. 117).

Virtually any pattern of organizational action is open to alteration and reconfiguration. Organizations therefore can transform themselves by replacing unproductive images they have of themselves with those of a new and better future. According to Cooperrider, since organizations have the capacity to create their own realities and futures, the key to an organization's having a hope-filled future is its capacity to be self-reaffirming. Therefore, every organization that wants to change itself needs constant reaffirmation. Creating the conditions for organization-wide appreciation is the single most important action for ensuring conscious evolution of a valued and positive future.

Asset-Based Community Development

A few years ago, researchers at Northwestern University conducted an innovative assessment of a public housing development for the urban poor in Chicago. The researchers rejected the usual expert-dominated, problem-focused approaches for determining needs in crime-ridden, poor communities and instead developed methods for determining the inherent assets within the development and the people who lived in it. Beyond asking residents, "What are the challenges that the people who live in this apartment complex have?" they also asked, "What talents would any of the residents bring to their community?" Four single women, all with children and on public assistance, claimed they were excellent cooks and had dreamed of having their own restaurant. The women were asked to provide food for the lunch meeting where the researchers presented their findings. The lunch was such a great success that with the help of some technical assistance and start-up funds, the women were subsequently able to open their own soul food restaurant.

The researcher's asset-based approach presupposed that given opportunities and encouragement, residents of so-called needy communities had the wherewithal to use their own talents and skills to change their lives and become contributors to the economy and society.

This second development parallel to affirmative facilitation is the asset-based approach to community development. After three decades of community development research, John Kretzmann and John McKnight from Northwestern University established the Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute in 1995 (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). Their work has provided convincing evidence that when communities focus on their assets rather than their deficiencies, they can create new business opportunities, improve local health and service delivery, revitalize their housing supply, strengthen their infrastructure, incorporate marginalized citizens into productive community life, and increase their visibility and power within larger community contexts.

AFFIRMATIVE FACILITATION: EMPOWERING THE PEOPLE

The best way for a people-focused process consultant, an asset-based community developer, or an appreciative inquirer to work with a community or organization is by playing the role of facilitator. Effective facilitation embraces the tenets of affirmation that underpin any of the basic approaches just discussed. The driving question for an affirmative facilitator is, "How do I ask questions that lead this group to discover their own power?"

For example, a typical organizational or community change engagement might call for a SWOT analysis-identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Typically, expert consultants would interview a series of senior stakeholders within the organization, and perhaps some key external figures, and then compose a written document, following the SWOT scheme (called the situational analysis or current reality) to serve as a basis for further interventions. All too often in this scenario, the client group simply puts the information away and moves ahead with business as usual.

By contrast, an affirmative facilitator would propose that a series of short workshops be conducted throughout the organization (or community) whereby a greater number of the stakeholders of the organization would be allowed to provide their input into the SWOT picture. After contributing to the inventory of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, the participants would be asked to identify similar themes or emerging patterns, revealing powerful clusters of concerns that would suggest action.

Note also that the employees (or community members) themselves are doing the work, and it is their view of the organization that is being gathered, affirmed, and analyzed. Their group process helps them build a common story about their situation and strengthen the human relationships between them. The facilitator is relying on the resident experience and wisdom of the stakeholders themselves as the primary source of data and action options. In the process of being asked about their own experiences with the organization, their experiences with it are being affirmed. As their experiences are affirmed, they are readier to participate in the act of responding to their own analysis. The group members become owners of the data and action plans, which deepens their motivation to change far beyond simply being asked for their input in a series of interviews, which are then coalesced and presented back by the expert outside consultant. In my experience as a consultant, no one wholeheartedly implements what others have planned (Troxel, 1993).

In a sense, all good facilitation is about allowing the members of the organization to affirm their experiences as the basis on which change is built. This is why the term *affirmative facilitation* has been used. Affirmative facilitation allows the members of a community or organization to say yes to their situation and embrace it as the basis on which their future will be built.

So, continuing the SWOT example, frequently an affirmative facilitator might ask the group members to probe more deeply and reflect on their results, asking, "What are the vulnerabilities within this list of strengths?" "What are the assets inherent in this list of weaknesses?" Not every workshop led by an affirmative facilitator has the chance to probe beyond the surface, frequently due to the constraints of time and circumstances, but the facilitator is always ready to guide the group deeper.

After a SWOT analysis, is it natural to turn to visioning. Once the participants have painted the current reality, moving into what one would like to see in place in five years provides a vehicle for pent-up hopes and dreams to be expressed. Reading the future is based on a realistic perception of the present. You cannot really see the future until you can clearly see the present. Affirmative facilitation honors the will of the people and capitalizes on their sense of destiny and the well-being of the organization. It assumes that each individual has a hope-filled future vision. Even a cynic is seen as a person whose vision has been thwarted. Beyond that, the individuals in the group build on one another's shared sense of purpose for the organization, affirming the ideas expressed, and enhancing their willingness to act upon the outcome.

Once an organization or community is able to craft a vision of the future for themselves, the participants begin to live their vision and start to put it in place. Like miners who go deep into the bowels of a mountain to seek the valuable ore that has been lying there for millennia, affirmative facilitators go deep into an organization or community looking for the assets that have often been hidden under daily routine, negative attitudes, and misconceptions. With the assistance of the organization's members, the facilitator mines these assets. Instead of picks, buckets, and screeners, the facilitator's tools are acceptance, honor, realization, comprehension, awareness, and esteem. The mining process consists of skillful questioning that leads the group to its own discovery and appreciation, dreaming and envisioning, designing and constructing, and destiny or sustaining. The "ores" that are mined are shared understanding of the past, present, and future and workable solutions accepted by participants with ownership in the mining process.

The facilitator brings the following beliefs to the mining process: concern about changing people's lives as well as changing an organization or community's image, an appreciation of diversity as an asset, a realistic view of life's ambiguities and paradoxes, and the belief that all people, no matter what their position in the organization or community, are valuable to the change process. Typically, the solutions to problems are found to have been in people's minds and hands rather than having to be brought in from the outside.

AFFIRMATIVE SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT IN OTHER DISCIPLINES

Affirmative facilitation is not alone in realizing the power of image, in grasping that the key to being an effective consultant rests on one's view of the reality you are looking

at and the people you are serving. Throughout the past several decades, people in many other fields, such as education and the sciences, have developed affirmative approaches based on image theory. Following are examples of this new paradigm of affirmative system development in these fields.

Education

In Robert Rosenthal's breakthrough 1968 book, *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectations and Pupils' Intellectual Development,* it is evident that what we expect from one another often turns out to be what we actually get. Even in scientific research, researchers' expectations can become the cause of their results. The Pygmalion effect involves a belief about another person held so strongly and persistently that it becomes a reality. The person believed in, being believed, becomes the person whom he or she is believed to be. Rosenthal's work with teacher expectations, also known as the self-fulfilling prophecy, has been demonstrated in more than three hundred studies.

The sociologist Robert Merton said the self-fulfilling phenomenon occurs when "a false definition of the situation evokes a new behavior which makes the original conception come true" (1968, p. 477). In other words, once an expectation is set, even if it is not accurate, we tend to act in ways that are consistent with that expectation. Surprisingly often, the expected result comes true. In short, one's expectations become reality. So the question of the educator, indeed, even of the parent, is how to harness the power of positive expectation.

Physical and Social Sciences

A similar point has been shown to be the case with the hard sciences as well-with the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. In the field of quantum physics, Werner Heisenberg pioneered the notion that "the more precisely the position of a particle is determined, the less precisely the momentum of that particle is known, and vice-versa" (1983, p. 66). Because of the scientific and philosophical implications of the seemingly harmless sounding uncertainty relations, physicists often have called this more descriptively the "principle of indeterminacy." In lay terms, this means that it is physically impossible to measure both the exact position and the exact momentum of an object at the same time. The more precisely one of the quantities is measured, the less precisely the other is known.

Heisenberg concluded that what we observe is not nature itself but "nature exposed to our method of questioning" (1958, p. 81). One's method of observing reality constructs reality itself. The observer changes the observed. Michael Shermer (1997) noted that this truth applies for all observations of the world. He recounts how when Columbus arrived in the New World, he had a theory that he was in Asia and proceeded to perceive the New World as such. Such is the power of theory and our preconceived views of the world.

Anthropologists have learned that the act of studying an event can change it. They know that when they study a tribe, the behavior of the members may be altered by the fact that an outsider is observing them. Subjects in a psychology experiment may alter their behavior if they know what experimental hypotheses are being tested.

This means there is no such thing as pure objective observational knowledge of facts in any of the sciences. There are no "facts" as such. The more we know, the less we know. The most amazing aspects of life perpetually elude conventional science. Life is a

constant surprise. Furthermore, whatever it is that one observes depends as much on the observer's position as it does on what is being observed. We can never know with certainty which is possible and that which is impossible.

This has implications for the consultant: we tend to find and realize what we are looking for. This does not mean that there is no real basis to what we find. Rather, it is just that "reality has a tendency to reveal itself in accordance with the perspectives through which it is approached" (Morgan, 1998, p. 8). There is, in the physical world, no objective reality. We literally create our own world. If we re-fuse to believe in the power that members of communities and organizations have, that power does not exist, and vice- versa. What we believe is what comes true.

This opens up the role of the subject of the research, valuing the participant of the research as much as, if not even more than, the researcher itself. It provides further evidence of the importance of involving the members of the organization or community as active participants in the consulting exercise.

Health

This same phenomenon is seen also in the field of health. One of the lessons from the health field is that one can never know the limits of healing, never know with certainty who will live and who will die, who will recover and who will not. What is known is that patients have far more influence over their own well-being than doctors frequently believe. Research has shown that when people recall affirmative moments in their life, their health indicators improve (Mehl-Madrona, 1997).

AFFIRMATIVE FACILITATION: RELEASING FREEDOM

One of the notions in the field of social psychology is the idea of the internal locus of control, which holds the most pertinent parallels for facilitators of organizational change. Having restricted freedom can result from external limitations on freedom, such as being a prisoner in jail, or from internalized limitations, such as being imprisoned by parental teachings that one is a failure. People with restricted freedom, no matter what the cause, have the following options: succumb to their circumstances, rebel against their circumstances, or transform their circumstances by taking a new relationship to them. Their response comes from staring reality in the face and coming to terms with it-or not. Some people whose freedoms are restricted by external limitations develop a sense of internal locus of control, that is, a sense of freedom; In a maximum-security prison, for example, are some inmates with no possibility of parole who have put together a constructive life that includes volunteering as tutors for other inmates, attending twelvestep meetings and church, and working. These inmates find their freedom in how *they* relate to the situation they find themselves in rather than the externalities of their situation.

People who are internally victimized or sense themselves with restricted freedom have the same options: succumb, rebel, or transform. Those who choose to transform are those whose attitudes about life most closely resemble the tenets of affirmative facilitation. These individuals realize that in spite of all they have experienced, they still have valuable contributions to make to society. By focusing on their internal capacity to have power over their relationship to the past and present, they can face the future with hope. They do not find their freedom externally, but rather in an internal locus of

control (Rotter, 1966; Lefcourt, 1976). The psychotherapist Victor Frank described this same phenomenon in his classic book, Man's *Search for Meaning* (1959).

Only those who grasp their own internal locus of control can be an agent of change in their own lives. If one thinks that life's outcomes are determined by forces beyond oneself (fate, the system, "them," the government, and so forth), then one's response to life is passive. Those who grasp that they are their own change agents tend to be more proactive in their responses to life and the situations they find themselves in. They become accountable for their actions because they sense they are able to respond to life's challenges. They avoid excuses for why things do not happen the way they want and instead take responsibility for the outcomes.

The same holds true with organizations and communities as with individuals. After the vision workshop, it is customary to ask the group, "What are the obstacles standing in the way of realizing the vision?" This question probes the underlying barriers - institutional, attitudinal, and so forth - that stand in the way of the organization fulfilling its future.

For example, in a workshop with a municipal agency that I led several years ago, when it came time to title the blocks and barriers to their vision of the future, the titles themselves gave the participants' perspective away. The group wanted to title the first cluster of issues "Uncontrollable Outside Forces" and the second "Federal Bureaucratic Regulations?' Implicit within the titles was the view that the members of this agency had no control over their situation. They felt their locus of control was outside themselves. If the planning had ended then, there would have been no need to proceed because the group felt they had no control over actions that would alleviate the barriers to release momentum toward their vision.

The key breakthrough came when they were asked, "How do you participate in perpetuating these forces? How do you take part in keeping this situation intact?" This moved the conversation from the barriers as being outside their control to issues within their control. It was only once they got a handle on the ways in which they perpetuated their own blocks that they were free to consider alternative action plans.

What looked hopeless to them became something possible. Affirmative facilitators see things inside the group (or allows the possibility that they might be there, whether "seen" or not) that the group does not. Facilitators see possibility; to be more precise, they may not actually see it, but they know it is there. With this knowledge, the facilitators skillfully guide the group in workshops to discover this possibility for themselves.

Unfortunately, not every facilitated workshop has such a powerful "aha!" experience when an individual or a group experiences a rush of freedom to be in control over their situation, but when it does happen, it is like a breath of fresh air blowing through the group, releasing new energy in its wake, energy to seize the possibility and put it into action.

THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTER OF AFFIRMATIVE FACILITATION

In the light of all that we have said thus far, affirmative facilitation holds great promise as a frame of reference for a society that is growing more diverse demographically and economically and that must function in a world that is both globally

interdependent and closely connected through interpersonal communications. Affirmative facilitation's frame of reference is holographic, polyphonic, heliotropic and chaordic.

One aspect of the notion of a hologram is that within any part of an organism one can "see" the whole of the organism. A holographic process draws in the whole system, from executive to front-line worker to support staff. The equality of this process makes each person feel valued and necessary to the change process and establishes connections that are important during the change process. For this reason, an affirmative facilitator desires to have the whole system in the room for the planning session, knowing that the plan with the widest perspective is better than one from a narrow view.

Affirmative facilitation is a polyphonic process, in which all people invited to participate are considered responsible for the result. The word *polyphonic* means "many voices" and is used to describe organizations that effectively hear the voices of all their employees (Andersen, 2001). All members are encouraged to enunciate their ideas, hopes, and visions for their organization or community and to make their opinions and suggestions known. Taking advantage of all of the diversity in the organization is a critical step in bringing about this polyphonic feature. For this reason, affirmative facilitators prefer to mix group process sessions with different parts of the community or organization. As Sandy Schuman has observed, "To believe in the efficacy of groups to solve our most complex and conflictual problems, we must select group members for their diversity, for their unique constructions of reality" (2002, p. 1).

The Greek word *helix* means "toward the light." Affirmative facilitators bring their own positive outlook to the organizations or communities they serve. In doing so, they work with them to develop a corporate ethos that illuminates the heliotropic character of their group. "Organizations are heliotropic in character in the sense that organizational actions have an observable and largely automatic tendency to evolve in the direction of positive imagery" (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney, and Yaeger, 2000, p. 43). With that vision, they have the capacity to create their own realities and futures. For this reason, affirmative facilitators take great pains to deeply explore the pent-up hopes and dreams of every stakeholder of the organization to manifest the already present vision.

According to chaos theory, order emerges out of chaos. A chaordic system is one that "combine[s] chaos and order in ways which interweave . . . infinite variety and self-organizing order" into an entity that is diverse and unique unto itself. What appears to most as chaos, however, upon closer scrutiny, one can recognize a coherent and cohesive pattern (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney, and Yaeger, 2000). In Birth *of the Chaordic Age* (1999), Dee W. Hock, founder and former CEO of VISA International, describes how he first conceived of an electronic global system for the exchange of value. He proposed that the future lies in transforming our notion of organization and embracing the belief that the chaos of competition and the order of cooperation can and do coexist, succeed, even thrive. For this reason, while affirmative facilitators prepare extensively for their workshop sessions with written procedures, they are always prepared to let go of the plan and to go with their trained intuitions as to what works best for this group at this time.

FACILITATING AFFIRMATIVELY

Affirmative facilitation is more a style of facilitation than a separate set of methodologies. It can be used to enhance the delivery of various programs such as Open Space, Technology of Participation, Total Quality Management, and Future Search.

Adopting an Affirmative Facilitation Style

Here are some practical tips for adopting an affirmative facilitation style.

Creating an Affirmative Climate Setting a context is an important first step in any group process, but how you set the context is extremely important. Previous chapters (see, for example, Chapter Five) have already emphasized its importance, so I will add just a couple of additional ideas.

Every time I address any person in the group, I call him or her by name. I practice memorizing everyone's name and use their names frequently. This helps people realize that I am taking them seriously and have taken an extra step to know them. This may seem insignificant, especially if you are going to be with the group only a short time, but I find it critical.

Keeping eye contact with the group is another key to creating an affirmative climate. I try never to look at my prepared notes but rather move my eyes from one person to another. I also avoid looking over the group at the back wall, that is, beyond where they are seated.

I try to use humor as much as I can. Some people are fairly natural at this; others of us have to practice. If you are a newer facilitator, it is okay to experiment with telling a joke near the beginning of your facilitation exercise. I can attest to the power of the release of endorphins in the body's chemistry to release affirmative participation, in balance with adrenaline as well.

Require the Participants' Best One way to elicit people's best is to challenge them beyond what they think they are capable of. Therefore, sooner or later in every facilitated opportunity, I find myself asking challenging questions to help things in new ways. For example, if the responses the participants are providing are abstract, I might ask, "If I were to put you on salary to do this, when would I know you've earned a raise?" The idea is to help them think differently about things they might be taking for granted.

Another way to do this is by inviting the participants to join in the work of group process. I used to think that the facilitator had to do all the work of processing information and input. Now, after I have modeled it once, I ask the participants to comment and place their input with the other groups of similar information. This is a modified version of the affinity process many teams are familiar with, so they get the idea pretty quickly. This reduces the dependency on the facilitator and turns the process over to the participants more easily.

Prepare Flexibly/Flexibly Prepare Although I am prepared for every session, I try never to over prepare, that is, become too attached to my preparation and group process procedures. I try to be open to the teachable moment, those times during most sessions when it seems as if a group is on the verge of a breakthrough and needs to spend more time on a particular topic. Frequently, these might be the moments of biggest enlightenment, but only if the facilitator is willing to allow them to happen.

Sometimes I inadvertently get in the way of group process rather than allowing the group to run itself. This usually happens each time I become attached to a particular set of procedures or a specific planned outcome. The facilitator needs to remember that the participants have to become the owners of the input if they are going to be owners of the output as well. I keep a sign in front of my desk, taking a clue from James Carvell of the Clinton presidential campaign, "It's Their Process, Stupid!" This keeps me focused on the real issues in team development.

Reinforce Everyone's Participation I give feedback to the group at the end of almost every session I lead. It is like giving them a blessing on their work and themselves as a group. I share with them how I experienced the session myself; some have been critical and even harsh on a couple of occasions when I thought the group was simply going through a game-playing exercise with me and not taking the challenge of their task seriously. Even at this late stage in the process, I am still hopeful that I can arouse the group.

Challenges to Affirmative Facilitation

The biggest critics of affirmative facilitation are those who view the approaches as Pollyannaish, claiming that new paradigm consultants and facilitators are blind to the tragic life conditions some people experience. They call their criticism "realism?' They are more comfortable with problem-focused expert consultation approaches and the use of deficit-based needs assessments and techniques that reinforce their convictions and substantiate the community's need for their services. They sometimes even have a vested interest in maintaining the perspective that a community or organization has no assets. After all, who would really want an outside expert if they felt they already had the wherewithal to improve their own situation by themselves? Affirmative facilitators help organizations move beyond this platitude and require their organizations and communities to not only look at the harsh realities of their situation but to go beyond, to see through them as well.

Deficit-focused consultants consider resistance to change, for example, as a phenomenon to be battled and overcome. They look for causes of the resistance and the resister's need to hold on to it and then expend great amounts of their own and the resister's energy trying to get the resister to accept the consultant's interpretation of the situation. The result is frequently a frustrated consultant and still-angry resister.

The people-oriented facilitator views resistance as a normal and equal energy component to all aspects of the change process and creates an environment in which resistance to change is seen as an energy that can be redirected. The facilitator also respects resistance as an effort on the part of participants to educate him or her; it demands that the facilitator listens more closely to surface an underlying insight on how best to help the participants. Thus, resistance is no longer opposition, but the participant's way of encouraging the facilitator to better understand and serve the participant's needs and issues. Clarification and refraining with honest and respectful inquiry are mechanisms for addressing each person's concerns, ideas, and fear of the unknown. They are strategies that allow participants to offer their own interpretations and expectations. These strategies often remove, reduce, or transform many of the underlying causes of resistance. By responding to the facilitator’s tactful exploration, the participants become clearer about the issues and frequently let go of some or all resistance.

CONCLUSION

Affirmative facilitation provides the opportunity for organizations and community members to shed their negative self-images and discover the talents and interests that make up their true selves. Affirmative facilitators assist in and empower this process.

Ascribing to an affirmative worldview when undertaking the transformation of organizations or communities leads to more successful outcomes than basing one's efforts on a deficit- or problem-oriented worldview. The affirmative process of facilitation brings people together in a way that makes them more confident individuals and cohesive team members, thus increasing the likelihood of the success of the overall endeavor.

Affirmative facilitators are like the character Belle in the Disney movie version of the classic story of "The Beauty and the Beast." Belle believed in the Beast so much that he was able to be transformed into a prince.

Trusting the process of affirmative facilitation is more important than directing it as experts. The participants' willingness to question and make provocative proposals is an act of affirmation and faith in the organization or community. People and organizations grounded in the affirmative facilitation worldview are the ones who successfully lead their organizations and local communities into the future.

Chapter Thirty-Three

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