

The Teeth of Facilitation: *When is Standing Up Like Falling Down?*

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? JIM TROXEL

Facilitators do a lot of standing while performing 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 clients ask us to help them because they think we can bring 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 with.

So, what does it mean to come in from "the outside" with some sort of impartiality to mediate among conflicting interests toward a consensus? The new science worldview has made it clear there are no such things as objective observers. All observers "interfere" with what they are observing in some way. 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 do stand for something. We can't help it. So, I want to share what I think it is that we, as professional facilitators, stand for in our work.

Last year I got a letter from a new facilitator in Indiana. I had been a mentor for him as he was learning the job. He asked, "Have you ever had the experience of having facilitated a group, and it really went great. Everyone thought you did wonderfully.

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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?" But his question bothered me. I think I identified with him a bit more than I was willing to admit.

It got clearer the day I picked up my wife after she had facilitated a session for the National Runaway Hotline Network conference in Chicago. I could sense equal portions of euphoria and melancholy filling her, 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 the melancholy fell over her. I asked, "Well then, what's wrong?" She said, "They think they did it themselves!"

Somewhere in her response I started to sense she had stumbled onto 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 the client group's 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 four things which I believe we stand for, and how those beliefs enable our clients to achieve stunning results.

I. *Our Worldview Shapes How We Operate*
This is rather obvious. All of us have a worldview that shapes whatever we are doing. Margaret Wheatley's book *Leadership and the New Science* provides language to help us to understand how the world we operate in influences the way our organizations function, and how leaders and facilitators work within organizations. Central to this worldview is the interconnectedness of all things. Simply put, it's the notion of unity. Life, fundamentally, is a unity. I always get a charge when I enable people with seemingly different self-interests to discover that 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 my book, *Government Works* concerning Miami's municipal government and their Labor Management Committees. Miami has the 911 emergency phone system, and the norm for 911 response time is optimally three minutes. Four minutes is tolerable. However there are some sections in Miami where the average is seven minutes and longer. The emergency response system in those sections is assigned to the firefighters and ambulances. A Labor Management Committee went to work, figuring out how these areas of the city could have faster response time. The members looked at this issue in depth. In those areas of seven minute or longer

response time, 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, first, to install the basic life support equipment that is normally in an ambulance, onto these pumpers. Second, 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. Still, the Labor Management Team came together and said, "This is what we believe will work." They promoted the idea pretty hard, saying 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 blinders of adversarial presuppositions—between labor and management, between employees and bosses for example, prevent 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 the Miami Labor 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 see a new paradigm coming in labor management. A facilitator like Ellie stood firm and enabled the city to see what the situation needed. She got the staff beyond their knee-jerk blinders about adversarial relationships.

II. *Our Images Form Our Possibilities*

The second point is that facilitators are concerned with image change. Actually, facilitators are concerned with changing people's 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 held by many public servant workers in government. Part of it is 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 facilitating a strategic planning workshop with the Chicago Department on Aging. At one point in the process we looked at the root causes to issues. The previous session on the vision had gone well, but when we came to the obstacles and started digging for root causes, it got really tough.

I would ask, "What are the obstacles, the impediments blocking the realization of your vision?" Concerning their biggest cluster of issues 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, "We can't do our job because of Somebody Else Out There—management for example, or the political environment. They thought that if they could get rid of everyone outside themselves,

they would be okay. They seemed to be saying, "Since the world is the way it is, there is nothing we can do about this."

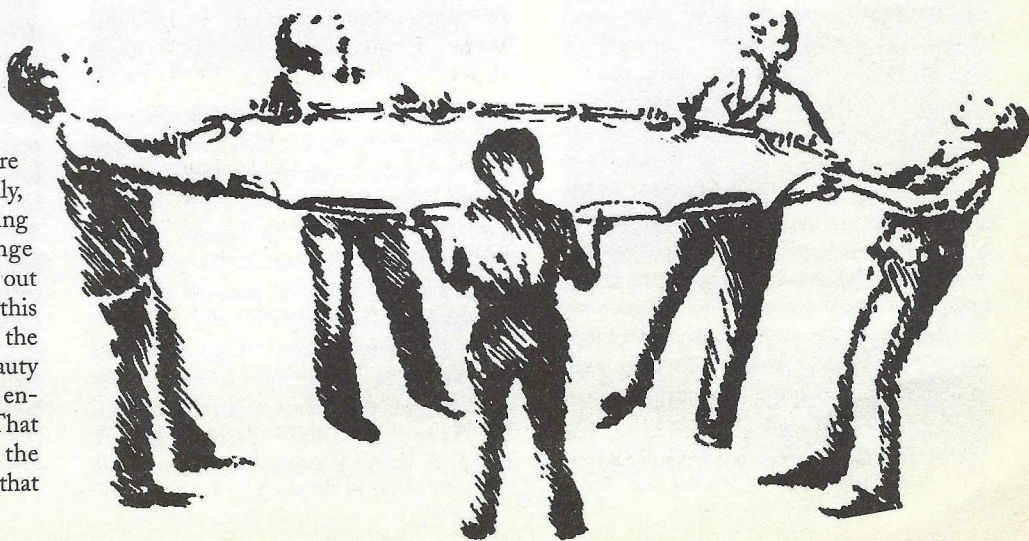
Now facilitators, if people think that their problems are outside their control, then they are not going to come up with any creative strategies to deal with them. So you have to push and probe. We, as human beings, unwittingly participate in perpetuating the very things that hold us back from our greatness. We seem to unintentionally support those things that hold us back. It is only when we see how we maintain those very problems that we are free to move forward.

I asked this group, "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 then it will set you free.

III. *Ambiguity and Paradox are the Stuff of Life*

For me, the third thing is that facilitators embrace ambiguity and paradox as the way life is. Take, for example, the



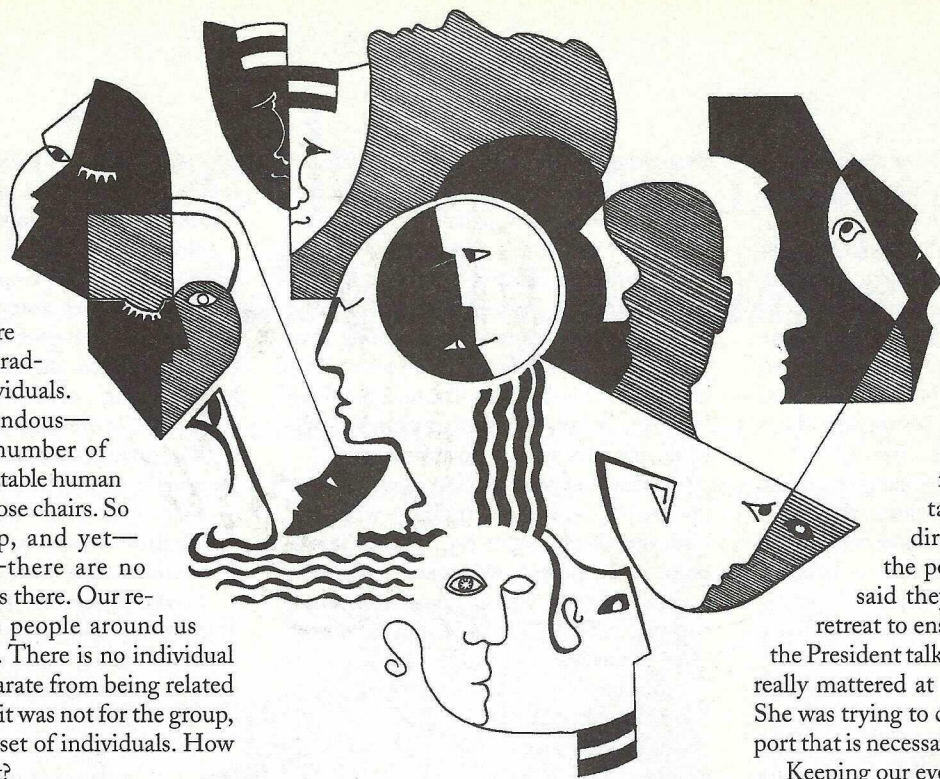
individual and the group. Any group you work with, you begin to realize it is not a group. There is no group there. All there is, is a collection of radically diverse individuals. This is just tremendous—that we got this number of unique and unrepeatable human beings sitting in those chairs. So there is no group, and yet—simultaneously—there are no separate 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?

When you design a facilitation event, you are mindful of balancing content and process, the product and 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 what the topic, the group experiences a profound happening in the midst of their deliberations? Maintaining balance is one way.

Balancing and embracing several other kinds of paradoxes is critical: For example, we are going to discover that organizations need to increase diversity for their own good. I have not seen any studies yet, but I know they are going to come. We are beginning to see this in terms of change and leadership processes. When you increase the level of diversity, you are able to add perspectives, dynamics and so on. Organizations that do not embrace diversity are going to be left behind. Facilitation enables organizations to embrace diversity.

Other paradoxes that facilitators embrace include the past and present, the past and future, the 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.” We ask, “How does this global problem show up in this group? How is this local issue manifested around the world?” Another one is spirit and matter.



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One chapter in *Government Works* 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 retreats. 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 church and state has us confused. Nowadays, we

think 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, and frequently more so. Yet you can't talk about these things directly—certainly not in the political sphere. Carolyn said they tried throughout the retreat to ensure that the Cabinet of the President talked about the things that really mattered at a deep, profound level. She was trying to create the trust and rapport that is necessary to build a team.

Keeping our eye on all these things and maintaining the balance in the midst of the ambiguity is very important.

IV. *The Facilitator Does Bring an Ethical Framework*

The fourth point: Facilitators live out of an ethical framework. Again, this is somewhat obvious. We all have ethical frameworks. Our ethical framework is the posture we take in relating to the 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 not know it, but every organization is of value to the larger society.

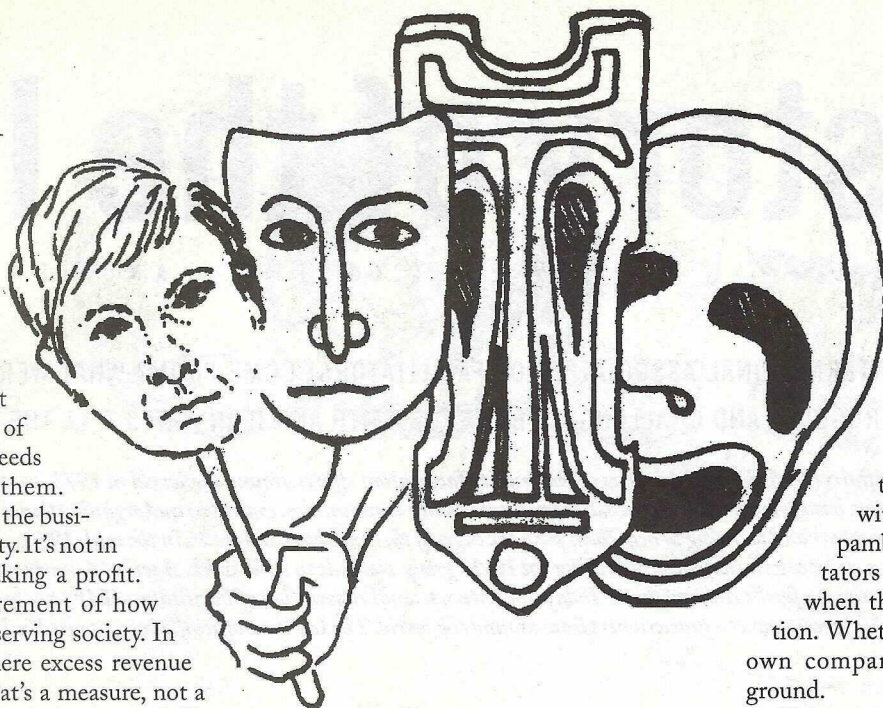
There's a story in *Participation Works* about a company in Guatemala called Metacentros. This company had done great work creating “Super Mercados” (big open-air shopping malls) and had saturated the urban areas. Then they came up with a great new strategy. They held a strategic planning session with their employees who came with up creating Super Mercados, rural style, in the hinterlands of Guatemala. They discovered in doing so, 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. And that discovery gave them a great sense of courage, knowing they were helping to recreate the nation's future.

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, not a purpose. There are things we call "for profit" corporations and "not-for-profit" corporations. In the non-profit, which I'm all too familiar with, we think if we're broke, we're doing something good. Nothing could be further from 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 use it 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 or that organization. This is fundamental to quality brainstorming. I believe this to the extent



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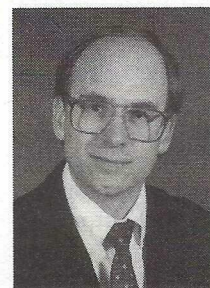
that if the Klu Klux Klan asked me to facilitate their strategic planning retreat, I would have to give it due consideration. In other words, you ask yourself, "What would it mean to try to go in as a facilitator, as the so-called 'objective outside other,' with your values and your ethical posture and 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: You are a person who goes into organizations and tries to find the greatness within them. This facilitation profession is a profession with teeth. It is not a namby-pamby sort of thing. Good facilitators know what they are about when they work with an organization. Whether it is their client or their own company; they have a standing ground.

One way to know if you, as a facilitator, are standing for something during a seminar, is that you start to get the feeling you're falling apart. That's a healthy thing. Certainty is the enemy of effective facilitation. Following a pre-determined set of procedures without any flexibility is a sure sign that you're more attached to your own ideas of what the client needs than to allowing transparently, 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 you weren't there, you'd be off track. ❖



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