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Facilitation From the Inside Out

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Introduction

We sometimes joke about facilitating and the “Technology of Participation as requiring expertise in masking tape. And watching some novices attempt to use it in workshops when they get hopelessly entangled is so amusing that you begin to appreciate the skill involved. But there’s a lot more to it than that.

To facilitate is, to translate from the Latin, “to make easy”. One who facilitates is one who makes it easy for others to perform their tasks. That’s true in a simple and in a profound sense. Simply speaking, the facilitator thinks through procedures and formats that enable a group to gather its cumulative insights, to order them, and then to decide on a course of action that has consensus and commitment backing it.

Anybody could do that who stops long enough to get outside the content and consider the process, and who is willing to bother with the little logistical details that so often disrupt the flow of discussion in a group. You could do all those things and still be a meathead. That’s hardly worth one’s time and energy, though, if done cleverly enough, it might easily be a source of great wealth. Not many people are willing to do it.

Facilitating in a profound sense means calling out the authentic humanity among participants in a group and assisting the group to become more than the sum of its parts. It’s a task of reconciliation: of individuals with the group, of people with the organization, and of people with themselves.

What Facilitators Know

Facilitators understand some things about life that undergird our sometimes fanatic concern for details that others regard as unimportant.

Facilitators know that people are moved by hopes and dreams.

Most of us deny that fact: we’ve been so disillusioned and disappointed that none of us beyond the age of eight takes Santa seriously. It’s not that the facilitator is naive. In fact, the good facilitator could give a cynic a case of depression with the facilitator’s lucidity about what’s really possible and likely. People live in the tension between the desired future and the present condition. Attempting to reduce that tension by negating the future is a common but dehumanizing practice. Even in the midst of knowing what you know, you still dream. People are driven to hope, even in hopelessness, and that hope is a driving force in human affairs. So facilitators dare to draw on vision to elicit unspoken hopes and dreams for the future, even when their content is highly unlikely. The facilitator

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is restoring tension to life. In this exercise, you are working in an arena that is beyond the simply rational. You are working with spirit. And spirit has little to do with statistical probability. It has to do with genuine desires and passion that operate below the conscious level. Vision is not what you do, it's what you dream. We are moved by our dreams.

One job of facilitators is to discern ways of “smoking out” the real hopes and dreams of participants, to help them get beyond caution and acknowledge their desires, even when it means heightening the tension between vision and reality. Facilitation is not stress relief. It does not mean making people “feel good.” It means making them own up to the energizing reality of life. Common visions can overcome a wealth of diversity. A group with similar desires for the future is a powerful force for getting things done.

Facilitators know that problems can be solved; obstacles are opportunities through which to realize the future.

Authentic human potential is often thwarted by negative perspectives that close off alternatives. Full potential is realized only when one perceives all that is, is good. This is a perspective on reality, not on a moral judgment; it allows for looking deeply and seriously at reality without being threatened by blocks. In fact, obstacles, irritations, issues, barriers and constraints are part of life at every point. They aren't problems to “solve” as if it were possible to get away from them; they are opportunities to seize in creating a desirable future. Facilitators help people to get beyond fault-finding, excuse-making and blame-seeking to the underlying factors, or contradictions! Sometimes you have to be hard on people both to identify the real contradictions and to regard them in a positive light.

Facilitators know that people find their fulfillment in taking responsibility, not in avoiding it.

Authentic humanness is not realized only after hours; the after-hours time is a time of replenishing the energy and perspective required by one's work. One's work, the expenditure of energy, is the place where life finds fulfillment. Structures, attitudes and habits that deny this fact of life are the major enemy of facilitators. The old hierarchical form of organization, along with “top down” decision making, has been a very effective form of evading responsibility - for all levels in an organization. At the top, people declare that they cannot know everything that is going on; at the bottom, people declare that they cannot do anything without permission. For both levels, and everywhere in between, the structure provides space to hide from responsibility - and authenticity. This may be one reason that hierarchies are so intransigent; everybody finds them a comfortable dodge. That one can hide is an illusion that was exposed at the Nuremberg trials: the soldier is responsible, even when he's carrying out orders. By implication, just following orders does not mitigate one's responsibility for one's work. Facilitators know that, and also know that whatever role one plays in however authoritarian an organization, one still has responsibility. And living out that responsibility is energizing.

Facilitators know that teams are tension filled.

The peace one experiences in human fulfillment is not serenity, it is active struggle with colleagues in a similar cause. It is using one's resources to the maximum to achieve what is worth achieving. So the teamwork that facilitators advocate and generate is not based on mutual affection so much as on mutual commitment to a common task. Startling amounts of diversity of age, sex, culture and interest can be held within that commitment. And the diversity is tension-filled. But it is mitigated by

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common concern to get a job done to which each element of diversity has a contribution to make. When the tensions are recognized and appreciated, then they tend to produce creativity.

What Facilitators Do

These tidbits of profound understanding give rise to particular actions on the part of the facilitator: symbolic action, but that does not mean it's less than real. This type of action has to do with taking exquisite care to be sure the group is honored. Life is basically two-dimensional: the dimension of practicality and the dimension of significance. The sphere of the mundane is enlivened with elements of practical care that point beyond themselves to significance; symbolic activity deals with this world of significance.

Symbolic action means attending to the space of your gatherings. The facilitator does not leave it up to the maintenance people to clean up: (s)he inspects the meeting room at least an hour ahead of time, usually rearranging the furniture to provide a venue that announces to the participants as they arrive, "Something significant is about to occur here." This means providing a decor that highlights the focus of the gathering so that when the minds wander, as they surely will, they wander to something related to the topic rather than to something unrelated. And (s)he remains during the breaks straightening up the place so that, on reentry, participants hear the same message. And it may mean filling the space with sound - music - during the breaks to create a mood of relaxation in the midst of work. The facilitator is the profound janitor for the group.

Symbolic action means attending to the time of meetings. Nothing dishonors quite so much as waiting while one or two latecomers arrive. If it's inevitable that some come late, then the facilitator either begins on time or has activities for the rest of the group as special treats. Rhythm is also important: the facilitator varies the pace of sessions so that repetition and routine are avoided and people remain attentive to the proceedings. A boring pace can kill the group's participation. The facilitator avoids it. The facilitator is the profound metronome for the group, sensing the rhythm that is most enlivening at the particular time of day, and pacing the activities so as to capitalize on the "beat" of the group.

Symbolic action means constantly celebrating significant milestones in the group's journey. Birthdays, awards, anniversaries, task completions, payday, winning (or losing) an account - virtually anything can be the basis for a celebration. The point is not so much to have fun as it is to dramatize the significance of the actions that are taking place. The facilitator is the profound clown for the group.

In terms of selfhood, the facilitator plays the role of a model of authenticity for the group. (S)he avoids defensiveness, even when attacked; (s)he listens for the depth of decisions that need to be faced; (s)he speaks only from experience, preferring remaining silent to giving "good advice" ungrounded in personal experience; (s)he rejoices in the successes of the group; and (s)he gives the appearance of having the time of her/his life. The facilitator can play whatever role the group requires to provide a walking image of authentic selfhood in the midst of practical tasks. One may be serious, probing the depths of unknown puzzles; one may be glad-handed, setting at ease those who are reluctant to participate; one may be distant, causing the group to reflect on its own insights; or close, sharing one's learning in ways that illuminate the present situation of participants. Since the facilitator has nothing to win or lose, (s)he is totally free to do what's required by the situation to disclose authentic human potential. The facilitator is the group's role model.

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The Facilitator Style

The facilitator is filled with wonder at the mysterious complexity of life. Nothing is without potential awesomeness. Every person, every comment, every method, every organization is a window into the profound mystery that pervades all that is. So one exudes appreciation, even while doing fierce battle with the forces of inauthenticity. Strangely, that same appreciation becomes an infectious epidemic capable of transforming a work situation into a place of life investment.

The facilitator is a person of provocation.

That is, the particular work at hand is done with energy, creativity and enthusiasm; but the real work of the facilitator goes beyond the particular. The facilitator, no less than the priest, is in business to mediate between ultimate values and particular situations. Specifically, the facilitator brings the particular group / organization / individual into encounter with the profound dimension of life, and brings ultimate values down to the practical level. That's what it's all about. Everything else is just the specific "assignments" within which one operates.

The facilitator is absolution on the hoof. Blame is not a relevant category for the facilitator, everyone is to blame for anything, so there is no point to grudges and nothing to gain by pretending righteousness. So (s)he lives as though forgiven of character defects, mistakes, weaknesses and ignorance - not without regrets or apologies, but without the crippling effect of lingering guilt and fears of reprisal. More importantly, the facilitator brings this stance to the group where it becomes a catalyst of humanity and gratitude.

There you have it, the truth about facilitators. Next time you're fouled up in masking tape, remember these things. It'll add a twinkle to the frustration.