# Stretching the Facilitator

## Wayne Nelson

At a facilitator's conference, a woman asked me, "How do you deal with difficult participants?" Knowing I was avoiding the question, I gave my standard reply: "There are no difficult participants. ToP methods treat every person as inherently valuable with real wisdom to contribute." "But surely", she pushed, "surely you have encountered people who have sorely tried your patience, and made you stretch a great deal?" "Yes," I said, "I have to admit that the behaviour of some people puts one on a rack, where you either stretch enough or you break. But they are the true test of the facilitator's art."

Of course, it is true that facilitators find certain people difficult, though looking at them as negative is not helpful. I asked other facilitators on two list servers what behaviours they find difficult and how they deal with them. In the annex I group these behaviours into three major areas: participation problems, adversarial style, and disruptions. Then I wrote out my own experience in response to the woman's question.

We all need to be reminded that, on the whole, facilitation is less focused on dealing with behaviour that is beyond the margins than it is in enabling each person and the whole group to think, act, and be at their possible best. It emphasizes the facilitation of the positive rather than responding to the negative. But in the same breath it must also be said that many of the behaviours in groups that we find difficult and objectionable have their roots in environments in which their participation is restricted in some way. If the facilitator's role is focused on behavioural control, difficult behaviour can be expected to surface. Much difficult behaviour stems from bad process: people are not heard, listened to, or affirmed.

*Dealing with Ineffective Participation*

Some time ago, I facilitated a two-part consultation with health professionals, where the second session built on the first. The second day had new participants, so I started with a conversation to reflect on the work of the first session. One of the participants, a well respected and knowledgeable academic, made to commandeer the reflective discussion. What was intended as a brief review turned into a painfully long series of verbal essays from the professor. He attacked things people said in the previous session. He implied that other participants were not qualified to deal with the topic. We heard him out, then belatedly began the second session.

It was interesting that, once I started the brainstorming workshop using cards, he seemed to melt into the group so that everyone was participating with animation, when just moments before they were edgy and detached. The card-storming process enabled the professor to focus, and the quieter community representatives to get their ideas in. Appropriate method is key to all-round positive participation. A central question focuses the discussion and elicits involvement. A series of questions guides the group through a thinking process. For planning

and problem-solving workshops, using cards structurally spreads out the participation, and indirectly deals with those who want to hijack the discussion.

When I begin any session, I point out that everyone's thoughts are valuable and everyone is needed for the best results. After a context and the focus question, I give the participants time to write down their own answers before they speak. I also try to give an example of the kind of responses. On the first question, it helps to get one response from each person. This tends to break the ice for everyone and make subsequent participation easier. Then I open the discussion to the whole group. I make a point to acknowledge participants' ideas respectfully, because this encourages everyone to participate. It seems a truism that the first level of participation is about getting ideas out and enabling people to actually hear each other. One woman vented her frustration on the group, and when I simply wrote her comment down, she looked around clearly surprised. Maybe she was used to being treated as an outsider, an enemy, or as someone who doesn't matter. Nobody tried to rule her feelings invalid. She was not used to this. She calmed down, her vocal and facial mannerisms softened and she contributed creatively and helpfully.

Pointing out over-participators is risky. The jury is out on trying to get individuals to change their behaviour outside of the group setting. Besides, facilitators are not necessarily good personal counsellors. Enabling people to be self-conscious enough to make these shifts can be a time-consuming challenge. I prefer the indirect approach. If a few people seem to be carrying most of the conversation, I simply ask to hear from others. Asking for responses from the other side of the room, or from those who have not yet spoken gets the message across. Gentle teasing in situations like this often allows highly vocal people to see their own behaviour, and gives the group permission to even out the participation in their own way.

Calling directly on silent participants is risky, but, done gently and with respect, it can help people find their voice. Many people tend to be quiet in large groups, but smaller groups focused on a specific question may help to engage the quiet ones and make it harder for a few vocal people to dominate the discussion. Each small group needs a clear question, a specific assignment and a set of procedures. It also needs a reminder to ask the first question to each member of the group in turn.

People participate and learn in different ways. Affirming diverse styles and using nonverbal techniques (such as drawings, diagrams, stories and drama) helps people participate in ways that emphasize their strengths. Using several modes of thinking and interaction balances participation more effectively than dealing directly with quiet individuals. When people can't understand what others are saying, they tune out. In that case, it is always appropriate for the facilitator to ask people to ask the speakers to clarify their words. Sometimes just saying things in a slightly different way allows the group to understand. It takes very little time to restate or explain an idea. Just ask for a phrase or a sentence. I led a series of workshops in which one participant had a habit of speaking in a highly stylized, somewhat inflammatory, manner. After asking him to rephrase his ideas several times, so the rest of the group could understand, he

got the point and toned down his rhetoric. It took some effort, but it was done respectfully; and it worked.

*Dealing with Adversarial Styles*
In preparing for a strategic planning retreat with a group of public-sector managers, I was warned about one of the group leaders. Apparently, he had a reputation for being strident, pushy and argumentative. In starting the session, I made a point of emphasizing the importance of respect for each person's input. I talked about active listening and made sure each participant contributed to the discussion. We went through three sessions. I realized that no one was displaying the behaviours described to me. I checked that the person in question was actually in the room, and I was assured that she was. Because the whole discussion was conducted with respect, her ideas were heard, the workshops were creative and productive, and the potentially destructive behaviour never surfaced. Shifting out of a debating mode into consensus building makes all the difference in the world. People want their ideas to count, and our process lets that happen without pushing or competition.

Suppose you are moving along in a session and an argument breaks out. What do you do? I believe there are some basic understandings to build on. A certain amount of tension is a sign that a group is healthy and thinking. A diversity of views is very valuable to ensure that decisions are sound and thoughtful. Groups do need to gain an understanding of the perspectives involved, resolve issues and make choices. Most arguments happen when people are really getting to the central questions and are moving toward choices. The key is to keep the dialogue clearly related to the original focus question. I try to refer the group back to the original question and ask people to clearly state their points of view one at a time; so I can get the varying perspectives standing side by side. I find it helpful to have the group examine the assumptions inherent in the various points of view as well as the complex of principles, values and criteria they want to apply to the situation. Then they can think together and make the necessary choices. Operating in this way helps a group to deal with the complexity and form a common mind.

If an argument gets hot, sometimes a facilitator has to step in, break the flow, and structure using the four levels of the ToP™ Focused Conversation Method, creating a set of questions that focus the conversation. This gives a way to step back, reflect, and hear each other's relevant experiences, which lie behind their feelings and convictions. When the conversation has progressed to an appropriate point, ask someone who is a bit detached to state what they believe to be the consensus. In these situations, it is important that the discussion be respectful, focused on the central question and not spill over into judgmental statements about individuals. You may need to state this point directly to the group.

If the conversation becomes very heated, or so tangled that resolution seems impossible, taking a break can help. I leave the group with a question to move them forward. When we return, I recap the major points and follow the conversation through to its most reasonable conclusion. Sometimes a separate conversation or another session is needed. Another option is to form a

small task force to consider the matter and bring a recommendation back to the group. The report and conversation usually lead to a resolution or statement of consensus.

*Dealing with Disruptions*

At the beginning of one public consultation, a woman stood up and wanted to present a prepared analysis and proposal statement. I told her the meeting process would use everyone's insights, but she demanded that the group deal with the statement immediately. It was a tense and rocky situation for a while. But, after listening to her and respecting her ideas, I was able to see that she was not alone. Clearly there were many others in the room that had given this concern a lot of thought and that we needed to hear from everyone. It took a bit of time to listen, empathize, and allow her to see that others also had concerns, but she reluctantly stepped back and participated with the rest of the group in what could have been a hijacked situation.

People are concerned about the quality of participation and getting helpful results. If they fear that things will not go well, they may raise questions about the process. Take the time to answer questions. Authentic questions deserve real answers. But if process becomes the primary focus, you will lose time and energy. If things are moving along, such questions can be deferred by asking the person to write down the question. I try to deal with these questions at a time when I can focus on them more helpfully.

Occasionally, a participant will take on the facilitator, questioning her qualifications, or the meeting process itself. What to do? The ability to separate self from process, and process from results, provides a key to success. The ultimate question is, "What needs to happen so that this group gets the results it needs." A group cannot get results from a process that it will not use. You can try to persuade the group to go your way, suggest an alternative, or create a discussion that will help the group to create its own model.

People need to examine the options and consequences carefully. Be sure to point out that the time available begins after this discussion. These events are hard on the facilitator and the group; but they can also be extremely creative as learning experiences, so I try to go gently and tread lightly. Patience, flexibility and faith in the group's capacity to work its way through issues are required. Finally, the facilitator makes an active, living practice of loving the group as illustrated in this story by a consultant that I know.

*"One day I was facilitating a session with a contentious group. As I introduced the process, one man verbally attacked me. He ranted for about three minutes saying that he wasn't going to use my dialogue process, that he had absolutely no respect for me, and that I was dressed like a tramp and he expected a wasted day. The blood rushed to my face, thoughts screamed around in my brain, and I knew I couldn't let him take control, but I did not interrupt. When he finally stopped, I said I was sorry that I had offended him. He contradicted everything I said, and I realized that he was going to slam everything. I became very quiet, looked at him and loved him. By loving him, I mean the active practice of listing his good qualities, trying to see him as a valuable addition to the group and being conscious of*

*the good I was there to express. I felt my inner peace return and when he finished. I made a good eye to eye connection and said, "I'm going to do my best to change your mind today," and walked away.*

*Later, after going to all of the other participants' tables, I had to come back to his. He lashed out at me again. I smiled and said, "You don't know what courage it took for me to walk up to this table again!" He spoke of not liking or not doing the exercise and slammed me a few times more. Once more I looked in his eyes and said, "I'm going to work very hard to change your mind and I hope you'll help me." He was quiet after that, and on the break he launched into a long rationalization for his outburst. The rest of the day I looked for opportunities to give him verbal strokes and had him help with the note taking. The happy ending is that by the end of the day, he hugged me and thanked me for a passable workshop experience. For me, the bottom line is: when in doubt, try to love more."*

We are turning the tables as we open the dialogue and structure authentic participation. When we receive and honour every response, we thumb our noses at those who claim that higher authority or exclusive knowledge should override the collective wisdom of everyone concerned. Building consensus forms a common will and in doing so, enables a shift into a new style. Those ready to make the shift will make it, but those who are not ready will take up the old forms and blow them up as big as those giant Mickey Mouse parade balloons.

People dedicated to dealing with people and change are not supposed to be surprised by things like this, but we are. If we approach each situation and each individual with real respect, authentic humility and genuine compassion and methods that go along with those values, we will be able to assist people in putting new forms of interaction in place.

## Annex: Behaviours that Facilitators Find Difficult

**Ineffective Participation**

*Passive*
Hesitant participation: responds only when called on - gives terse answers - does not want be there - carries past hurts - shy - uncomfortable in groups - preoccupied – sees no relevance - disillusioned with past sessions - stays apart from the group – moves around or leave the room - unwilling to work with small groups - does not settle down to do the
work - expresses dislike for the topic - manifests stoic perseverance.

*Over participation*
The first to respond - talks a lot – becomes the centre of attention - grabs a spotlight - makes long, verbal essays - questions every response - focuses attention on own problems and agenda - can't stop talking – loud voice.

*Miscommunication*
Unable to communicate in the appropriate framework - may not understand the process or the group's culture, terminology or operating patterns - finds it hard to express thoughts, makes

late comments or marginal connections - comes up with surprising discoveries at "odd" times - expresses strong personal agendas - comments on unrelated topics.

## Adversarial Styles

*Argumentative*
May not agree with ideas expressed – engages in logical and scientific debates - wanders on philosophical explorations - grinds ideological axes - expresses opinions in strong terms - strives for verbal domination to exert influence over a decision - is strident – repeats own point over and over - refuses to stop.

*Demanding agreement*
Freezes the discussion to demand agreement - browbeats the group - attempts to summarize the group's conversation with personal analysis or solution - ignores the group's ideas - passes judgment on comments - rejects suggestions - uses position to control the process.

*Personal confrontations*
Two people in direct disagreement – makes personal attacks - expresses ideas in highly inflammatory statements - expresses racial or religious prejudice - uses highly emotional outbursts as a lever.

## Disruptions

*Inappropriate actions*
Shows up late - leaves early - cracks inappropriate jokes - makes loud interjections – goofs around - whispers and conducts private discussions - shifts the focus of the group to themselves and their actions.

*Process complaints*
Expresses impatience - disagrees constantly with methods and processes - sneers at steps - objects to carrying out the process – sidesteps group process - quibbles over procedures - pushes alternative processes.

*Challenging the Facilitator*
Confronts and challenges the facilitator – acts as a "pain in the butt" - makes personal attacks - engages in intentional sabotage - tries to persuade the group to support their challenge - takes over an event - uses position to control the process.