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Believe in Doubt

Sandor P. Schuman

Believe those who are seeking the truth. Doubt those who find it. — Andre Gide

We live in a contentious world. Diversity of beliefs and values is the norm and we can expect to encounter conflict more frequently than consensus. The presence of conflict often stimulates each party or interest group to impress its version of reality on the others in an effort to achieve a change of mind and win agreement. However, even when agreement is reached there is no means for assuring that it is right.

One's understanding of the world is not based on careful reading and unequivocal interpretation of technical manuals but rather on socially derived and communicated knowledge and values. In the words of Peter Checkland, "Social reality is the ever-changing outcome of the social process in which human beings, the product of their genetic inheritance and previous experiences, continually negotiate and re-negotiate with others their perceptions and interpretations of the world outside themselves" (Checkland 1981, 283-284). Giovanni Battista Vico said it more succinctly, "To know the world, one must construct it." (Shrage 1990, xvii).

Too often in the search for truth, too many are too sure too early. Most of us are too comfortable with our views, our status quo, and are reluctant to change. Our truth, our internally consistent system, supports and sustains us. Few understand, as did Anais Nin, that "We don't see the world as it is; we see it as we are." This insight leads us to a key paradox: because the truth in which we believe is unique to who we are, we should not trust its generality.

If we should not believe in truth, then in what should we believe? We could say, "believe in doubt." Indeed, in this world of multiple, conflicting realities we need far more individuals who willingly exercise doubt, cultivating more openness, more questioning, more learning; people who listen carefully to each and every perspective—to understand fully but to believe doubtfully—even to doubt that they really understood at all! Still, it is critical to strike a balance between believing and doubting: too much belief and there is no learning; too much doubt and there is no action. So if we "believe in doubt," on what shall we base our action?

Perhaps we could "believe in groups"! Let's give this a try by making explicit two key premises and examining their implications:

1. Each individual in a group has the potential to make a valuable contribution.
2. Some group members might have more valuable contributions to make than others—more expertise, greater insight, better judgment—on at least a few of the tasks at hand.

The problem is that we rarely know which individuals are more expert at which tasks. There is no objective way to distinguish between one good contribution and another to determine which is better, or to know how to combine individual contributions to produce results that are better than any of the individual contributions taken alone.

Although we often rely on one person to integrate the group's thinking, this may result in that person's views dominating all others—and that one person might not have it right. Alternatively, we can allow the group to decide how best to make use of the contributions of each of its members. This requires that we help group members learn from one another, so they can correct one another's errors, enabling—at least theoretically—the group to perform better than even its most capable member. (Although this potential exists, such performance is rarely documented. For example, see Reagan-Cirincione 1994.) To reach conclusion requires consensus, because this requires that everyone must come to terms with each and every person's unique contributions. We have no better potential for attaining the best possible outcome. A critical proviso of believing in groups is that groups be representative of all pertinent perspectives, interests, and expertise. Since it is so much easier to reach consensus with a homogeneous group, members are often selected for the similarity of their views. 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. While we might *believe in groups*, we nonetheless should *doubt* whether the group is fully representative of all relevant interests, beliefs, and values. Consistent with this concern, we must keep in mind Norman Maier's admonition, "Reaching consensus in a group often is confused with finding the right answer." (Maier 1967, 241).

Let's strive to bring together people representing all relevant points of view. Let's fully put to use group interaction methods that encourage tolerance and respect, listening and questioning, independent thought and group conversation. Believe in doubt; believe in groups.

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Introduction

Learning organizations, five disciplines, dialogue, Quaker tradition, consensus, Participatory Rural Appraisal, coherence, electronic meetings, caucusing, mediation, values and ethics: these are the things that this issue is made of!

The discussions of IAF's Ethics and Values Think Tank have precipitated a number of controversial issues. Among them is a fundamental question about whether consensus is a fundamental part of group faciliation, or is it just one of the options for making decisios. In this issue's *Essays on Consensus*, Freeman Marvin, *Consensus is Primary to Group Facilitation*, and John Butcher, *Consensus is Situation Dependent*, explore this issue in depth.

Authors Kai R. T. Larsen, Claire McInerney, Corinne Nyquist, Donna Silsbee, Aldo Zagonel make the assertion that "…not only do facilitators possess exactly the values and intrinsic skills required to help facilitate the transformation needed for organizations to become learning organizations, but that most successful transformations will indeed be conducted by external facilitators." In *Learning Organizations: A Primer for Group Facilitators* the authors review the "five disciplines" at the core of learning organizations and provide insights particularly useful for group facilitators.

In conjunction with the growing interest in "learning organizations" so also has there been increased interest in "dialogue" as evidenced by a number of recent books on the topic. *Finding Clarity in the Midst of Conflict: Facilitating Dialogue and Skillful Discussion Using a Model from the Quaker Tradition,* by Malcolm Burson, integrates contemporary thinking about dialogue in organizations with traditional practices in the Quaker tradition and provides an illustrative example.

In *Participatory Rural Appraisal: A Brief Introduction,* Lance Robinson explains the origins and application of this facilitated approach to community development. The author emphasizes the participatory nature of PRA, the importance of facilitators' attitudes, biases, and behaviors as well as the tools that are typically used.

Coherence in Face-to-Face Electronic Meetings: A Hidden Factor in Facilitation Success by Pak Yoong and Brent Gallupe focuses on the relationship between the activities within a meeting as well as between the meeting and other activities. The authors report on a study involving conventional meeting facilitators who were trained to become electronic meeting facilitators.

"What is the difference between mediation and faciliation?" is a question that arises repeatedly. Gregorio Billikopf-Encina takes us for a closer look into the world of mediation in *Contributions of Caucusing and Pre-Caucusing to Mediation* and enables us to ask the question, "does caucusing have a role in the practice of group facilitation?"

First published nearly 25 years ago *in A Manual for Group Facilitators, What We Mean by Facilitation* by Brian Auvine, Betsy Densmore, Mary Extrom, Scott Poole & Michael Shanklin provides a fundamental statement about the nature, values and purpose of group facilitation. It suggests a code of ethics for group facilitators, highly pertinent as the International Association of Facilitators considers formal adoption of its own statement of values and code of ethics. This book chapter is reprinted here in our *Classics for Group Facilitation sec*tion.

Each issue of *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal* represents two major activities. First, developing the content: working with authors and reviewers, providing feedback on manuscripts, accepting completed papers. Second, changing that content into a presentable form and distributing it to our subscribers within our financial constraints. The first is the responsibility of the Editorial Board, while the second is that of the Publisher. With this issue we extend our welcome and thanks to Bill Staples, who has valiently taken on the role of Publisher. He brings years of experience in publishing, including his work as publisher of *Edges* magazine. In addition we welcome Ronnie Seagren, Copy Editor. We look forward to working with all of you.

— Sandor Schuman, Editor

Contributions of Caucusing and Pre-Caucusing to Mediation

Gregorio Billikopf-Encina

Abstract:

Drawing on his work as a researcher and practicing mediator in interpersonal organizational conflict, the author argues that pre-caucusing—a separate meeting between the mediator and each of the stakeholders *before* they are ever brought together into a joint session—can not only overcome many of the negatives often associated with caucusing, but has the potential of becoming a pillar of conflict management. This is especially so when pre-caucusing is integrated into a transformative mediation framework. Pre-caucusing affords stakeholders the opportunity to vent and be heard at a critical time in the mediation process, when it can reduce defensiveness and increase creativity. Once in the joint session, stakeholders communicate with each other with less mediator interference.

Key Words:

caucusing, pre-caucusing, mediation, conflict resolution, alternative dispute resolution, conflict management skills, conflict management mechanics

Contributions of caucusing and pre-caucusing to mediation

Wherever choices exist, there is potential for disagreement. Such differences, when handled properly, can result in richer, more effective, creative solutions. But alas, it is difficult to consistently turn differences into opportunities. When disagreement is poorly dealt with, the outcome can be *contention*. Contention creates a sense of psychological distance between people, such as feelings of dislike, alienation, and disregard. Such feelings can get in the way of effective communication and resolution of even the most minute perceived differences (Billikopf 2000).

Deep-seated interpersonal conflict requires an enormous amount of skill to mediate, even when the best of present-day theory is put into practice by trained and skilled mediators. Yet others who may have little mediation training, such as facilitators, may at times find themselves in the role of mediator.

Despite years of experience as an admired and skillful facilitator, a colleague confessed that mediation required specialized skills. He described a recent intervention as a third-party neutral, one where he felt thrown into a lion's den. The stakeholders became involved in an ugly escalation right in front of him. As a mediator he felt impotent to help, and was even threatened by one irate stakeholder.

There are a number of subtle differences between what facilitators and mediators do. Although they both draw from a subset of common tools, there are important distinctions. Generally speaking, facilitators tend to help groups through the process of problem solving and creative decision making. Mediators often deal with stakeholders who may be more openly antagonistic toward each other.

Facilitators, in many cases, work with situations where people may not know the way, but are excited about finding a common direction. Mediators, in contrast, often work with those who

have lost faith in the other stakeholder, as well as any hope of resolving the challenges in a mutually positive or amicable fashion. Having made such broad generalizations, it is important to note that individual mediators and facilitators vary enormously both in philosophy and approach.

There are times when interpersonal conflict may force a facilitator to concentrate on individual or group antagonisms. At times like this, the facilitator may benefit from additional mediation skills.

The focus of this paper is on the contributions of *caucusing* as a mediation tool, and more specifically, the use of *pre-caucusing*. In caucusing, the third-party neutral meets separately with each stakeholder, in the absence of the other contending party. In pre-caucusing, these separate meetings take place *before* the mediator ever brings the stakeholders into a joint session (Billikopf 1994; Billikopf 2000).

While countless factors are involved in successful mediation, some are so compelling that they may be called *pillars* of mediation. Pre-caucusing may well be such a pillar.

With notable exceptions, caucusing has received a somewhat uneven and often shallow treatment in the literature. Little is said explicitly about pre-caucusing. Certain value assumptions about mediation further complicate some of the controversy surrounding the topic. One of the most important of these values involves mediator choice between a *transformative* (Bush & Folger 1994) and the more traditional *directive* mediation.

The *directive* approach tends to focus on finding an acceptable agreement—one that may involve *settling* or *compromising*—between the contending parties. It is sometimes called directive because of the large amount of power and responsibility placed on the mediator. Some mediators may come close to acting as arbitrators, imposing a solution on the participants. Of course, mediators do not normally start out thinking that they will impose a solution. As situations become more difficult and emotional, however, it is increasingly likely that directive tactics will be utilized (Bush and Folger 1994; Folger, Marshall, & Stutman 1997; Lewicki *et al.*, 1994).

Transformative mediation

- allows stakeholders to retain maximum control over the process
- creates an atmosphere where parties can begin to connect interpersonally (i.e., provide mutual recognition or support)
- helps parties become better negotiators and reduce dependence on neutrals
- seeks solutions that are based on a careful understanding of the problem, rather than rushing into agreements that may be short-lived.

A study on self-esteem found that people prefer conflict management situations in which they have added control over the results, even when such control may mean making greater concessions (Swann 1996). My own preference towards transformative mediation affects how I see and utilize caucusing.

We shall first review what is said about pre-caucusing in the literature. The positive and negative attributions often associated with caucusing, and particularly, the special contribution played by pre-caucusing, are mentioned next. Examples of pre-caucusing are drawn from my involvement as a researcher and mediation practitioner in organizational settings.

Pre-caucusing in the Literature

Little is said in the literature about either pre-caucusing or the timing of caucusing in general. For instance, Moore suggests, "Mediators should take care not to schedule caucuses prematurely, when parties are still capable of working productively in joint session, nor too late, after unproductive hostile exchanges or actions have hardened positions" (1996, p. 320).

Bush and Folger are more explicit about the benefits of early caucusing: "Exploring delicate relational issues and laying further groundwork for recognition is sometimes easier in caucus, especially in the early stages of the process. Parties often find it difficult at first to give recognition directly to the other party, because it is difficult to give recognition to another person when feeling vulnerable oneself" (1994, p. 153). Having said that, however, they warn that breaking into caucus too early may interrupt the "transformative momentum" or positive conversation flow between stakeholders that may involve positive acts of mutual recognition (Bush & Folger 1994, p. 271).

There is one veiled reference to pre-caucusing, mentioned almost as an aside by Folger, Marshall, and Stutman. In a sidebar case, a mediator was using computer technology as an aid to conflict resolution. The mediator is reported to have met with the stakeholders "separately prior to the session to help them clarify their needs and positions" (1997, p. 285).

Volkema comes close to suggesting a pre-caucus: "The first contact between the mediator and the parties provides the first opportunity to establish public images. If this contact is between the mediator and one other person, only two identities need to be negotiated, although groundwork for others can be laid at the same time" (1988, p. 8).

Winslade and Monk (2000) are clear proponents of the pre-caucus, especially in cases involving entrenched disputes, although they studiously avoid the word caucus, given its negative associations:

> One of the first steps we prefer to take in a mediation is to meet with each of the parties separately …. In our experience, it is in these separate meetings that a lot of the major work of the mediator is done. … the separate meetings are a venue for significant developments in the mediation as a whole, not an optional adjunct to the process, to be used only when things are getting sticky. In our approach, they are central to what gets achieved (2000, p. 137).

Despite Winslade and Monk's use of the pre-caucus, I found they failed to take advantage of all of the pre-caucus's transformative possibilities. In the joint session stakeholders tend to address the mediator rather than each other. In fairness to Winslade and Monk, this happens even in the approach used by Bush and Folger (1994).

POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS OF CAUCUSING

Positive attributes usually associated with caucusing include:

- deciding whether to bring the parties together into a joint session (Moore 1987; Moore 1996)
- giving the opportunity to stakeholders to vent (Blades 1984; Emery & Jackson 1989; Hobbs 1999; Hohlt 1996; Moore 1987; Moore 1996; Pruitt *et al.* 1989; Welton, Pruitt, & McGillicuddy 1988)
- helping each party feel understood by the mediator (Emery & Jackson 1989; Hobbs 1999; Hohlt 1996; Moore 1987; Moore 1996; Pruitt *et al.* 1989; Volkema 1988; Welton, Pruitt, & McGillicuddy 1988)
- exploring positions and needs (Blades 1984; Castrey & Castrey 1987; Emery & Jackson 1989; Hobbs 1999; Hohlt 1996; Moore 1987; Moore 1996; Pruitt *et al.* 1989; Volkema 1988; Welton, Pruitt, & McGillicuddy 1988)
- reminding parties of the benefits of mediation (Moore 1987; Moore 1996; Volkema 1988)
- coaching stakeholders on effective communication and negotiation techniques (Hobbs 1999; Moore 1987; Moore 1996; Volkema 1988)
- appealing to stakeholders' higher principles (Blades, 1984; Hobbs 1999; Hohlt 1996; Moore 1987; Moore 1996; Pruitt *et al.* 1989; Volkema 1988; Welton, Pruitt, & McGillicuddy 1988; Winslade & Monk 2000).

Each of the next several sections (1) presents a key decision or outcome of mediation, then (2) underscores the contributions of caucusing followed by (3) the additional benefits of pre-caucusing.

Deciding to Bring Parties Together

The ideal is to bring the stakeholders together so they can make a joint decision and retain maximum control over the situation. An important outcome of effective mediation is to enable parties to handle future challenges without a mediator.

While the results of mediation can be markedly superior to those obtained through other third-party interventions (such as arbitration), this is not necessarily so with substandard mediation (Castrey & Castrey 1987). When things go wrong in mediation, stakeholders may take advantage of the sense of safety they feel in order to escalate the contention to even higher levels than before. It is possible that the mediator can do *more harm than good* by bringing the parties together.

Contributions of caucusing

Moore suggests that a mediator may use caucusing to deal with relationship problems, and that at times a neutral third party may want to "discourage or prevent the parties from returning to joint session ... when extremely strong emotions [might] be a major stumbling block to further negotiations" (1987, p. 88).

Further contributions of pre-caucusing

A central aim of the pre-caucus is for the mediator to assess the potential benefits and harm of bringing stakeholders together, *before* any damage is done. When contention is allowed to come into the mediation session, the opportunity for stakeholders to start with a clean slate is compromised. Emotional escalation, as Moore (1987) suggests, may also have a negative effect on reaching agreement.

In one of my early efforts as a mediator, a manager not only refused to look at his assistant in the joint session, but turned his chair so as to present his back to her. After this experience I developed a litmus test to better help me gauge the likelihood that a joint session would be successful: asking a stakeholder for what he or she values in the other (Billikopf 2000). This question is so telling because people involved in deep-seated conflict may have trouble finding anything positive to say about another (Bush & Folger 1994). This is not a question to ask at the outset, as stakeholders may be in too much pain to see very clearly. Nor should the mediator take the first negative expression as final. (For additional tests see Lewicki, *et al.* 1994, p. 360-361.)

In one difficult case, a top manager could not make a single positive remark about a middle manager who worked for him,

despite the positive things that had been said about him. I shared with the top manager my experience that there was little likelihood of mediation success where an individual could find nothing positive to say about another, and suggested a short break. When we resumed our conversation, the recalcitrant manager was waiting for me with a list of sincere, positive feelings about the other stakeholder.

Opportunity to Vent

> Two couples sat on either side of the table, glaring hostilely at each other. At the head of the table, a schoolteacher in her thirties was explaining the service. "First you, Mr. and Mrs. A, will have a chance to tell your side of the story and Mr. and Mrs. Z will listen quietly. Then you, Mr. and Mrs. Z, will have the same opportunity. After that we will discuss the situation and try to find a way to resolve it ... . While each side was telling its story, there were outbursts from the other of "that's not true" or "wait a minute," which the mediator strove to contain. (Pruitt *et al.* 1989, p. 202)

Mediators often struggle unsuccessfully to maintain control over conflict escalation. Early joint session phases where stakeholders share their stories, come up with ground rules, or begin to interact, frequently lead to unconstructive exchanges. "After each parent has voiced concerns, the two parents are encouraged to discuss the issues freely. In the majority of cases, an argument ensues," say Emery & Jackson, who discuss child custody disputes. "The fight is almost always unproductive ..." (1989, p. 6).

Kenneth Kressel explains that it is a "common theme in the mediation cannon" (p. 25) to let each party tell their side of the story in front of the other. He then shares the destructive effect of this approach: "Mrs. Smith would accept my invitation [to tell her side of the story] with relish, explaining that they were here because Mr. Smith was a worthless lout who cared nothing for his children or common decency and had been vilifying and humiliating her for years. For all she knew, he might also be an alcoholic and child abuser. His cross-dressing was a matter of record. She was in mediation by order of the court and was certainly willing to do her best to encourage Mr. Smith to 'finally be a father' but was, shall we say, skeptical. Whatever the tonic benefits of this outburst for Mrs. Smith, for Mr. Smith and myself the results were clearly unhappy: he would be provoked into an apoplectic rebuttal and I into a dismal contemplation of other lines of work. Yes, I exaggerate. But only a little" (1994, p. 26).

Some mediators feel that such loss of control is unavoidable, part of the process, or even necessary (Emery & Jackson 1989, Rothman 1997). I contend, however, that there is a better way; that stakeholders have already experienced what does not work, and remember it well. It is hardly necessary for them to re-experience it now in front of the mediator. Most third-party neutrals would probably welcome an approach where such dysfunctional escalations were either greatly reduced or completely eliminated.

Some have suggested strategies for reducing such futile outbursts, including telling one party to remain silent or focus on listening (Hobbs 1999) while the other speaks. To make the point, the listening party may be given a notepad and asked to take notes (Emery & Jackson 1989). It has also been suggested that joint sessions be held in a public place to help stakeholders tone down their emotions (Folger, Marshall, & Stutman 1997). While the note-taking suggestion has some merits, in this context such artifacts may delay contentious outbursts rather than prevent them.

Contributions of caucusing

Stakeholders may have some very poignant and deeply antagonistic feelings towards each other. When these can be vented in front of the mediator, the stakeholder often has less of a need to vent in a destructive manner in front of the opposing stakeholder. Defensiveness is reduced and creativity increased as the mediator protects stakeholders from further mutual abuse.

There is little disagreement on this point: while involved in caucusing stakeholders are less hostile than in joint sessions (Welton, Pruitt, & McGillicuddy 1988). When conflict escalates into contentiousness, as in these episodes, the mediator not only permits stakeholders to lose face, but just as importantly, she or he loses both control (Butler 1994) and face (Volkema 1988) in front of the stakeholders.

Further contributions of pre-caucusing

When dealing with acquaintances or strangers, individuals often go out of their way to make an effort to project their best possible behavior. This is especially true in what could be called a "courting period." This honeymoon period may last years, when stakeholders view their relationship as fair and equitable. When the rules of proper interpersonal exchange are violated (Brown, 1986) and someone feels taken advantage of, the situation can change quickly.

Similarly, in a stakeholder's relationship with a mediator—assuming the mediator is a stranger and/or has the respect of the stakeholders—individuals often try extra hard to be on their best behavior (Folger, Marshall, & Stutman 1997), lest the mediator think that they are culpable. Stakeholders are more likely to want to continue to make a good impression on the mediator after they have established themselves as reasonable people in the pre-caucus. Volkema suggests that "it is not unlikely that the parties will have established one image with each other and another image with the mediator" (1988, p. 11).

People also attempt to be consistent: "Consistency gives actors a desirable degree of predictability and trustworthiness, and it generates liking and respect" (Schlenker 1980, p. 232). Stakeholders are likely to feel a greater need to be seen as consistently reasonable by a mediator who has had sufficient time to meet with them individually. Effective listening is a very powerful tool, and people tend to respect those mediators who can listen with care and empathy.

Once the parties have exchanged insults in front of a third-party neutral in traditional mediation, on the other hand, much of the damage has been done. Stakeholders feel less motivated to show their best after exposing their worst behavior.

It is not that stakeholders pretend to be someone they are not. Because stakeholders meeting with the mediator in the pre-caucus know they will be meeting with the other party in a joint session, it is my experience that they are likely to share their own shortcomings, rather than wait for the other party to bring these out. It is this new facework (allowing another to save face) between stakeholders that the mediator wants to encourage in order to give parties an opportunity for a fresh start that is not based on blame.

Helping Each Party Feel Understood by the Mediator

It is difficult to expect stakeholders who have been involved in deep-seated conflict to put aside their own needs and listen to and focus on the needs of the other party (Bush & Folger, 1994). The natural tendency is for stakeholders to want to express their own perspectives first. The more deep-seated and emotional the conflict, the greater this tendency.

At times, tension in deep-seated interpersonal conflict situations can reach almost unbearable levels. In mediating such conflicts within organizations, it is common for stakeholders to strongly contemplate withdrawal from the enterprise. Psychological separation from the other stakeholder and possibly from the organization has already taken place. For instance, in child custody mediation, parties have already separated physically and psychologically from each other, yet need to work together for the benefit of the children involved.

Contributions of caucusing

Because stakeholders have the opportunity to meet separately with the mediator, each gets the opportunity to explain his or her perspective first, before having to attend to the other participant. When the stakeholder feels understood, an enormous emotional burden is lifted, thus making him or her more receptive to listen to others (Covey 1989). It is true that stakeholders have a special need to be understood by the other party in the contention, but being understood by the mediator contributes much. Often, it is a necessary step in terms of a stakeholder gaining enough confidence to proceed further.

Some individuals tend to be more silent than others. Caucusing increases the chances that an individual will talk (Hohlt 1996) and express his or her feelings. It is hardly possible for the mediator to help individuals who refuse to speak about "where it hurts." Mediators have the opportunity to show empathy in a caucus situation without arousing jealousies in other party.

Further contributions of pre-caucusing

It is at the start of mediation that stakeholders are perhaps most apprehensive as to what mediation may bring. Parties often come to the table with every defensive mechanism armed and ready to deploy (such as sulking silence, angry outbursts, combative body language). They may have trouble looking at the mediator, let alone the other party.

When a pre-caucus is used and the other party is not present, this stakeholder frustration and despair is re-directed in more positive ways. To have an empathic ear to listen to a stakeholder in such a non-judgmental way is powerful medicine indeed. I have seen people who were supposed to be "silent types" open up and talk freely. Men and women have wept openly as they released tension. Such emotional releases are not available to stakeholders in more traditional mediation.

The Exploration of Needs and Benefits of Mediation

The mediator attempts to understand individual items under dispute, as well as the general perspectives of stakeholders, and helps stakeholders keep alive the benefits of mediation (in contrast to other alternatives such as arbitration).

Contributions of caucusing

An important benefit of caucusing is being able to explore beyond positional bargaining, into stakeholder interests and needs (Fisher, Ury, & Patton 1991). Stakeholders can also be reminded that mediation confers tangible benefits over interventions where they have less control. This is more likely to happen when individuals feel less vulnerable and defensive, and are more willing to think aloud without feeling forced into making concessions. A mediator can increase her or his understanding of the situation through such exploration, but more important yet, the self-awareness of each stakeholder increases. For instance, it may become clear that a stakeholder desires an apology, rather than some other remedy.

Further contributions of pre-caucusing

When disputants enter the joint session with the benefit of a pre-caucus, the mediator can often take a less visible role. Each stakeholder comes to the joint session possessing enhanced clarity about the issues and self-confidence.

In one situation, after I listened to stakeholders during a pre-caucus, they were able to go on and solve the problem on their own. Bad feelings had developed between them concerning how each introduced the other to visitors and the media. Not only did they solve this problem on their own; they also dealt with related underlying issues, and even went on to discuss opportunities for future career growth and cooperation (Billikopf 2000).

As a neutral I sometimes do little more than introduce topics brought up during the pre-caucus. Allowing the stakeholders to solve an easier problem early on may give them the needed boost to deal with more challenging issues later (Blades 1984; Emery & Jackson 1989). Furthermore, a mediator who understands the issues involved can make sure that significant issues are not ignored. Despite previous antagonisms, communication between stakeholders during joint sessions is sometimes so fast paced that I have to scramble to understand and note their agreements. At times like these I feel like an unneeded observer. Setting up a situation where stakeholders address each other with little mediator interference takes transformative mediation to the next level. Although not all cases achieve this ultimate success, mediators can count on better communication flow and reduced contentiousness between stakeholders.

Educate Stakeholders on Effective Negotiation Skills

One measure of mediation success is when it equips stakeholders to handle future challenges on their own. While this may not necessarily happen after a single experience with mediation, the stakeholders can take with them increased self-awareness and conflict management skills.

Stakeholders may be shown how they can present a perspective using neutral or non-provocative language (Hobbs 1999) and without causing the other to lose face. An important part of conflict management is helping stakeholders recognize the need for the other party to build and save face (Ting-Toomey 1999; Volkema 1988; Blades 1984; Moore 96). In the absence of these skills, people are likely to revert to a more dysfunctional and emotional approach to communication. Participants may also develop a better understanding of the nature of conflict — learning how to divide big issues into smaller ones and what constitutes a proper apology, for instance. Both stakeholders gain negotiation power as they improve their ability to communicate in effective ways.

Contributions of caucusing

Mediators have the opportunity to privately discuss participant behaviors that are working, as well as those that are not. This avoids the appearance of favoritism associated with public compliments, as well as the loss of face connected with open criticism.

Further contributions of pre-caucusing

It is hard to expect the stakeholders to have a positive mutual conversation when they lack even the most rudimentary notion of how their communication strategies affect the other stakeholders. Those who grasp new insights into the negotiation process early on are more likely to enter the joint session feeling confident and prepared, with some control over the results.

Among the potential positive outcomes of transformative mediation is giving parties the opportunity to apologize and to accept an apology (Bush & Folger 1994). One stakeholder had a history of vitriolic temper outbreaks when I first met with him. His anger often manifested in shouting and profanity. During the pre-caucus, it became increasingly clear that this stakeholder felt no regret about his temper tantrums. He was quick to both minimize the extent of his anger, and to justify his bullying behavior. Had he defended such behavior in a joint session, his credibility would have been greatly damaged. Through a series of role-plays and conversations during the pre-caucus, he came to understand the importance of offering an apology for his profanity and anger. Furthermore, he suggested that the topic be brought up early on in the joint session so he could have a chance to apologize. During the first role-play his words had sounded shallow at best. The actual apology offered during the joint session was moving and sincere.

Regular caucusing has one advantage over pre-caucusing here. While the mediator can observe and coach a stakeholder during a pre-caucus, some dysfunctional communication approaches only manifest themselves during the joint session. This is not a fatal flaw of pre-caucusing, because a regular caucus can be utilized later to deal with such issues.

Much of what has been said here also applies to the idea of appealing to a stakeholder's higher principles. Many transformative opportunities that could otherwise be lost present themselves during the pre-caucus. For instance, an owner-operator said something touchingly positive about one of his managers during the pre-caucus. I suggested that it would be magnificent if he could share that thought with the other stakeholder during the joint session. The owner explained that he would never do so. I challenged him to reconsider, but left the ultimate decision up to him. The individual chose to share the affirming comment during the joint session, taking ownership for that decision, thus making it his own.

NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS OF CAUCUSING

A number of challenges are associated with caucusing, including:

- lack of stakeholder truthfulness (Pruitt *et al.* 1989; Volkema 1988; Welton, Pruitt, & McGillicuddy 1988)
- mediator bias (Blades 1984; Engram and Markowitz 1985; Moore 1987; Moore 1996; Pruitt *et al.* 1989; Volkema 1988; Welton, Pruitt, & McGillicuddy 1988)
- mediator control or abuse of power (Blades 1984; Folger, Marshall, & Stutman 1997; Keltner 1965; Moore 1987; Moore 1996; Pruitt et al. 1989; Volkema 1988)
- reduced likelihood that disputants will know how to handle future challenges (Pruitt et al. 1989)
- mediator violation of confidentiality (Blades 1984; Moore 1987; Moore 1996)
- interruption of positive movement (Moore 1996; Welton 1988)
- free time for the other stakeholder to use in an effort to build his or her own case (Welton 1988).

Attacks on Directive Mediation

As we shall see, most criticisms associated with caucusing are really attacks on directive mediation, rather than on caucusing itself. Where caucusing is instead used to increase stakeholder control through transformative mediation, most of these objections melt away.

As positive as mediator empathy toward a stakeholder may be, some fear this may lead to stakeholder untruthfulness. They reason that the absence of the other party during the caucus leaves the stakeholder free to exaggerate. Others argue that caucusing may lead to deals between the neutral party and one of the stakeholders. "Disputants often fear that clandestine deals or coalitions [may take place] between the other party and the mediator" (Moore 1996, p. 200).

Yet others suggest that caucusing simply gives the mediator too much control, lends itself to abuse of mediator power, and does little to equip stakeholders for future conflict in life. Instead, they argue, stakeholders may become more dependent on mediation. "Caucuses ... are explicit attempts to narrow issues, to push for compromise, and to synthesize arguments and positions." (Folger, Marshall, and Stutman 1997, p. 262). We even read, "caucuses provide mediators with the greatest opportunity to manipulate parties into agreement" (Moore 1996, p. 325). Volkema warns that mediators with a vested interest may promote one outcome over another (1988). The assumption, in all these cases, is that agreement is reached during caucusing.

There is nothing inherent in caucusing itself, however, that leads to these difficulties. Quite the contrary, Engram and Markowitz suggest that "... the judicious use of caucusing in ... mediation can even enhance the perception of neutrality and will result in increased trust in the process of mediation" (1985, p. 25). Likewise, where transformative mediation is used, caucusing may be seen as a tool to help stakeholders become better negotiators (Bush and Folger 1994).

In transformative mediation where it is *the stakeholders who solve their own disputes*, there is little to be gained by attempts to influence the mediator. Stakeholders need not be concerned that the mediator will make a secret agreement with the other stakeholders. Caucusing is used to teach negotiation skills to stakeholders, rather than to circumvent stakeholder empowerment.

Violation of Confidentiality

Another negative associated with caucusing is the potential for sharing confidential information obtained from one stakeholder, either purposely or through a slip. Certainly, mediators need to be careful not to divulge confidential information. Yet it should be clear that the purpose of caucusing is to help stakeholders better understand their own needs and prepare to communicate these to the other party in the joint session—not to talk about issues stakeholders want to keep secret from the other participant. True, some subjects are originally brought up in a somewhat raw manner. These are translated into more effective messages that tend to reduce defensiveness. For instance, if a stakeholder feels the other is inconsiderate or selfish, the mediator helps the stakeholder better understand critical incidents that may have led to this evaluation. During the joint session, the incidents and behaviors are discussed without the labels.

As a mediator, I note all the issues that are important to stakeholders during the pre-caucus, and give them a chance to expose these during the joint session: "A, Could you share with B the story you told me about X." Opportunities are balanced for both stakeholders to bring up issues that are then jointly discussed.

Sometimes ethical issues require disclosure, such as when a spouse is hiding an asset from the other during a divorce settlement. In those situations, Blades (1984) suggests that the mediator make it clear to the pertinent stakeholder that the neutral's continued involvement in the mediation depends on the stakeholder disclosing this information to the other party. Standards have been suggested for issues with and limits to confidentiality (Milne 1985; Moore 1987). Caucusing does not

cause an inherently unethical situation to develop, however. It simply affords the mediator an opportunity to help correct an unfair situation. "Much of the controversy surrounding the issue of caucusing ... stems from differences in training or orientation rather than from a real debate about ethics" (Engram and Markowitz 1985, pp. 24-25).

Interruption of Positive Movement

Caucusing may be called at any time, by stakeholders or by the mediator. Stakeholders may even wish to caucus within their own team, without the mediator. Alternatively, the mediator may need time alone and call a "mediator caucus" (Castrey and Castrey 1987, p. 15). Any type of caucusing may interrupt the positive flow of the conversation. The great advantage of pre-caucusing is that it does not interrupt the positive flow of communication that may be established during the joint session. Furthermore, pre-caucusing probably reduces interruptions after the joint meeting has begun.

Free Time to Solidify Stance

The concern that caucusing permits one party time to further solidify her or his own stance while the other is engaged in caucusing, is simply a non-issue. In transformative mediation one of the roles of the mediator is to help stakeholders consider potential pitfalls. Mediators help stakeholders truly understand the problem and thus avoid quick unworkable solutions.

CONCLUSIONS

Contention creates a sense of psychological distance between people, turning even minute differences into ones that seem insurmountable. A tool of particular value is the caucus, where the mediator meets separately with stakeholders. The literature has shed light into both the positive and negative contributions of caucusing. Positive aspects of caucusing include giving parties an opportunity to tell their story and be heard, explore needs, and vent privately. Mediators may also take advantage of caucusing to coach parties and help them understand the tools that will help them become better negotiators in the future.

Interestingly, most of the criticisms associated with caucusing derive from a directive mediation approach. When caucusing is used within a transformative framework, most of these potential negatives disappear. In transformative mediation the stakeholders remain the primary actors. Not only do the contending parties retain control over the outcome, they are also equipped with many of the tools they will need to solve future problems: "A skillful transformative mediator can use caucuses in a manner that not only avoids the problem-solving pitfalls [found in the directive approach] but actually builds transformative momentum over the course of a session" (Bush and Folger, 1994, p. 270).

Although in the literature we find some allusions to the benefits of the pr-caucus, very little is said explicitly about it. When pre-caucusing is used with a transformative approach to mediation, the benefits of caucusing are multiplied, and the potential negatives are further reduced.

The main reason why pre-caucusing is effective is that the mediator affords each stakeholder the opportunity to be heard when he or she needs it the most. A conflict situation that calls for mediation, almost by definition, is a difficult one. Stakeholders are most often focused internally and have little capacity to listen to someone else at the beginning of mediation. This internal focus tends to extinguish creativity by increasing negative emotion and defensiveness. A stakeholder who feels heard in the pre-caucus is better able to listen to the other stakeholder and to connect in a more positive way. The groundwork laid out during the pre-caucus allows stakeholders to address each other with little mediator interference.

Mediation has the potential to do much good. Poorly carried out mediation, where contenders feel they can exchange insults in a psychologically safer environment, can do more harm than other forms of neutral-party interventions. The pre-caucus affords mediators the opportunity to make difficult decisions as to whether to bring contenders into a joint session.

Sometimes the most productive approaches are the simplest, and this is certainly true with the pre-caucus. Caucusing as a mediation tool has been partially misunderstood and certainly has not been used to its potential.

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Coherence in Face-to-Face Electronic Meetings:

A hidden factor in facilitation success

S. Pak Yoong and R. Brent Gallupe

Abstract

Planning and designing are considered essential to the successful facilitation of face-to-face electronic meetings. However, relatively little is known about how to perform these pre-meeting activities. To illustrate how the planning and design of face-to-face electronic meetings might be improved, this paper uses the concept of *coherence* in meeting processes. A grounded action research study illustrates how new electronic meeting facilitators use two types of coherence, internal and external, in planning and designing their initial electronic meetings. Implications for meeting researchers and practitioners are considered.

Keywords

electronic meetings, meeting facilitation, Group Support Systems, grounded action research, IS research methodologies.

Introduction

Research[1] into Group Support Systems (GSS) recognised meeting facilitation skills as a key success factor in electronic meetings. Yet facilitating face-to-face electronic meetings has proven to be a difficult task. Research from experimental and field-based studies depicts the GSS facilitation process as both complex and dynamic. The facilitators have to consider, among other things, the interplay between socio-emotional and task issues, the balance between human and computer interactions, and the relationship between routine and flexible activities. Therefore, improving the meeting facilitation process should improve the quality and outcomes of electronic meetings.

This paper is based on Clawson's (1992) study of GSS facilitation, which identified the critical role dimensions of facilitators in GSS environments. Using critical incident methodology, Clawson interviewed 50 facilitators in GSS environments and documented 235 reports of effective and ineffective facilitators' incidents. The facilitators identified and ranked 16 role dimensions of facilitator behaviours, of which the top four are: (1) plans and designs meetings, (2) listens, clarifies and integrates, (3) demonstrates flexibility, and (4) keeps meetings outcomes focused. The top-ranked role dimension, plans and designs meetings, is described as the way the facilitator "plans the meeting ahead of time; includes [the] meeting initiator in the planning; develops meeting outcomes and agenda" (p. 118).

Similarly, Niederman, Beise, & Beranek (1996) also identified "planning and agenda setting" as critical success factors for effective electronic meetings. However, in an extended study of agenda creation among GSS facilitators, Niederman & Volkema (1999a) suggest that a higher level of GSS facilitation experience has a positive impact on the "goodness of the agenda." The authors also suggest (1999b) that experienced facilitators, at the start of a meeting, are more likely to engage the group in setting its own agenda and consider that not doing so "may represent a missed opportunity for less experienced and internal facilitators because development of the agenda by the group can embed problem formulation and goal-setting processes" (p. 19). Thus, it appears that the skill of a facilitator in

planning and designing the meeting is essential for an effective meeting. What is not so clear is how facilitators should think about and perform these tasks.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a concept that can aid meeting facilitators in these planning and design activities. This concept, called coherence, has received relatively little attention in the GSS research literature to date. Coherence combines the notion of a cohesive meeting structure with the fit of the meeting to other organizational processes.

After describing the concept of coherence and its theoretical foundations, the next part of the paper describes a grounded action research study that describes the experience of new electronic facilitators during preparation for their first face-to-face electronic meetings. The final section identifies implications for future research.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The concept of coherence is rarely associated with meetings, traditional or electronic. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (2001) defines coherence as "systematic or logical connections or consistency," or "the integration of diverse elements, relationships or values." These characteristics are usually not identified with typical organizational meetings. Such meetings tend to have a more chaotic or *ad hoc* quality than a systematic one (Mosvick & Nelson, 1987). However, it is the pursuit of coherence in the design and planning of meetings that may result in more productive meetings.

The concept of coherence is found in a number of knowledge fields. In educational settings, the term *coherence* has a specific meaning. For example, in the design of university courses, Hall (1994) describes two inter-related concepts of *external* and *internal course coherence*:

> Coherence can be viewed at two levels: the way an individual course complements other courses in providing a meaningful program – I call this external coherence; and the way a course hangs together internally (internal coherence) by linking the content, presentation and assessment framework of a course with the learning outcomes (p. 6).

Analogous to the ideas of external and internal coherence in educational settings are the notions of coupling and cohesion in software design in computer science. *Coupling* refers to how software modules are connected to one another, which is how they work with other software modules in the same program. *Cohesion* refers to how the modules are designed internally; that is, how the internal logic components fit together to form a complete module (Parnas, 1972).

Using these definitions, the concept of external and internal coherence can also be applied to facilitating conventional meetings (Friedman 1989; Heron, 1989; Hirokawa & Gouran, 1989; Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Schwarz, 1994). External coherence can be seen in the work of Friedman (1989) who introduced the terms *upstream* or *proactive* facilitation. He suggests that a proactive facilitator for an organization's problem-solving group should "investigate several factors upstream in that organization that are likely to influence their group, long before it gathers to meet" (p. 35). For example, the facilitator should find out how participants' preliminary thinking regarding the issues at hand may influence the design of the agenda.

Internal coherence is related to the work of Johnson and Johnson (1975) who explore the notion of *group cohesiveness* which they define as "the sum total of all factors influencing members to stay in a group" (p. 233) and Anderson and Robertson (1985) who argue that a cohesive group climate is achieved when "members feel comfortable, psychologically safe, and willing to take risks" (p. 147). In many respects, the business and professional credibility of meeting facilitators largely depends on how their clients perceive and experience the coherence of their meetings. For example, facilitators who kept their participants engaged, stimulated, and comfortable with the meetings tasks and the order of those tasks (Cooper, Gallupe, & Bastianutti, 1990), and who assisted the participants to experience *flow* in meetings (Ghani, Supnick, & Rooney, 1991), were rated highly in user satisfaction.

Similarly, electronic meetings require external and internal coherence (or coupling and cohesion). *External meeting coherence* can be seen as the way an electronic meeting complements other organizational activities in a connected and logical manner. For example, during an organization's strategic planning exercise a number of organizational activities must be completed before a strategic plan is realised. These activities may include an environmental scanning workshop, a series of consultation meetings with stakeholders, a market research survey, and so on. If the organization decides to conduct the environmental scanning workshop in an electronic meeting facility, the electronic meeting needs to be linked with the other organizational activities in a meaningful manner (Yoong, 1993).

Internal meeting coherence can be described as the way an electronic meeting is planned and managed so that computing and facilitation procedures are designed and executed in a connected and logical manner. The computing and facilitation activities that take place during these phases of the meeting must also be connected logically to achieve coherence.

We could find little research that looked at both external and internal coherence in GSS facilitation research. A number of studies have looked at internal coherence (for example, Anson, Bostrom, & Wynne, 1995; Niederman & Volkema, 1999a) but we found no published studies that examined

external coherence or, more importantly, both types of coherence together.

The intent of this research is to examine how both types of electronic meeting coherence are perceived by a group of experienced conventional meeting facilitators as they become electronic meeting facilitators.

Research Methodology

This study takes the grounded action research approach (Baskerville & Pries-Heje, 1999). This approach uses established principles of action research and relies on the constant comparative method of grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). It acknowledges the intervention of the researcher and assumes that the processes of data collection, coding, analysis, and theorizing are simultaneous, iterative, and progressive. The purpose in this case is to start with the notion of coherence and through a grounded action research approach, determine if the concept is substantiated and if it can be refined by a detailed analysis of the captured data. Therefore, this is preliminary research with the intent of gaining a deeper understanding of whether coherence is relevant in the context of electronic meetings and, if it is, to discover what aspects of coherence are important and how.

Action research approach and data collection

The action research component of this study was a program that trained conventional meeting facilitators to become electronic meeting facilitators (Yoong, 1995). As expected, the novice facilitators' experiences in designing and planning their first electronic meetings generated both new and richer insights into the notion of coherence than would have happened with facilitators more experienced with the electronic milieu. On the other hand, it is acknowledged that the inexperience of the new electronic facilitators might result in skewed observations.

Two training programs (or interventions) were conducted over a 15-month period. In total, ten facilitators took part. The trainees in the first program included a convenience sample of five experienced facilitators of conventional meetings who were interested in taking part in an electronic facilitation training program specifically designed for this study. The trainees[2] for the subsequent program were selected for a mixture of (a) people with medium[3] to high facilitation experience with conventional meetings, and (b) people with medium[4] to high computing experience. The training consisted of a briefing meeting, two full-day and two half-day training sessions, and a live electronic meeting (See Appendix A for the outline of the training program).

Four methods of data collection were used: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, personal journals, and video recordings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the trainees after each training event for an hour to an hour and a half. Transcribed versions of the audiotaped interviews were returned to the trainees for checking and validation. Notes from observations of the sessions, analysis of trainee facilitator journals, and analysis of the video recordings of the sessions all helped to confirm and enhance the findings as they evolved. The researcher was thus provided with a collection of diverse "slices of data" that enhanced the use of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Data analysis

The first step in the analysis of the data was to code around 90 transcripts from the semi-structured interviews. All the transcripts were imported into a qualitative research data management computer software program called NU*DIST (Richards & Richards, 1994). The software generated line numbers for each transcript. Slices of the data were labelled as conceptual units and each unit was assigned a conceptual code, consisting of a name and a number. All the remaining transcript lines were examined and coded with existing or new codes, depending on the conceptual similarities or differences to already assigned codes.

The conceptual units were again examined for similarities or differences and grouped into conceptual categories that represented a higher level of abstraction using NU*DIST's electronic indexing and retrieval system. New and higher levels of abstractions among these theoretical categories were also formed. The resulting theoretical categories and the relationships among them eventually became the emerging theory.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The research focuses on the behaviours of ten trainee facilitators while they prepared for their first face-to-face electronic meetings. These behaviours concentrate on the planning and design activities and make it possible to examine the concept of *coherence* in electronic meetings.

An organizational framework was used to describe how trainees progressed through the *initial consultation, planning, and preparation* stages of an electronic meeting. The framework begins from when the trainees have identified a group or organization to work with and ends when they set the stage for participants to use the computing procedures. During these stages, data were collected mostly from interviews and observations about the trainees' first solofacilitation[5] of electronic meetings. In addition to facilitating a fully-fledged electronic meeting, each trainee also observed a videotaped recording of that meeting. Analysis of data revealed two conceptual components of *coherence*: (1) *Creating and maintaining external coherence* and (2) *Testing internal coherence* (see Figure 1).

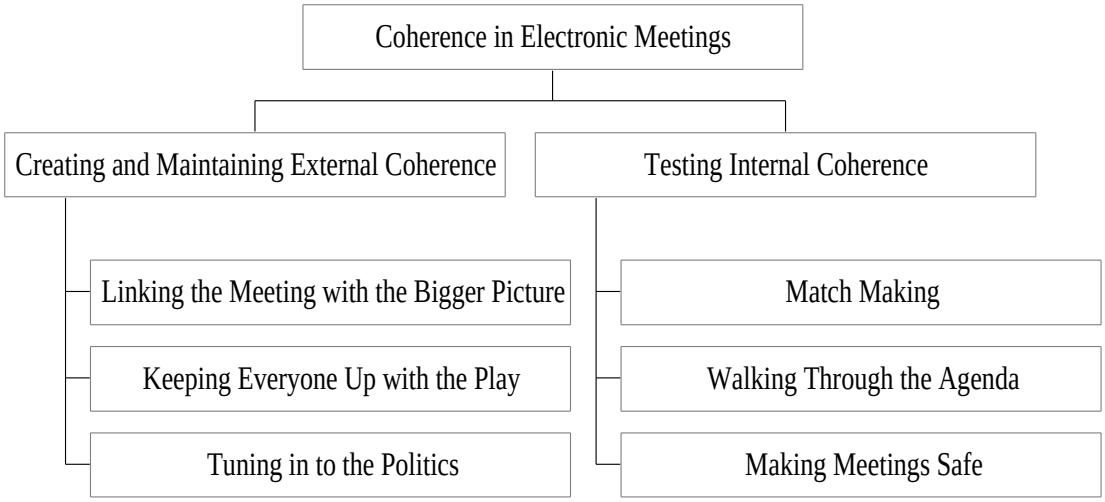

Figure 1: Coherence in Electronic Meetings

Creating and maintaining external coherence

From analysis of the data three conceptual subcategories emerged to describe how trainees create and maintain *external coherence*. For each subcategory, propositions were developed that could aid in the development of a theoretical framework for coherence in electronic meetings.

First, *Linking the meeting with the bigger picture* describes how trainees, during the preparation stage, understood what the organization was currently doing and how their own meetings fitted in with the planning activities of the bigger organization. A good illustration of this is how, in a strategic planning exercise, events that involved electronic meetings had to be linked with other planning activities.

Proposition 1: *External coherence requires the facilitator to develop a detailed understanding of the organization and the current context of the meeting to be facilitated.*

Second, *Keeping everyone up with the play* describes the trainees' concerns that some participants in the electronic meetings might not be up-to-date with relevant organizational affairs. The trainees felt that, for participants who were not up-to-date, connecting the electronic meetings with other current organizational activities could make less sense. The following interview excerpt illustrates this concept:

> I think if I'd written the objective up first then there would have been confusion about what the company report was about. Two people were not there when [the report] was done six months ago. People had different ideas of what it meant . . . To put that up first with all those questions would have created confusion . . .

Proposition 2: *External coherence requires the facilitator to ensure that all meeting participants have up-to-date knowledge of the organization and its activities relevant to the meeting being facilitated.*

Finally, the term *Tuning in to the politics* describes the trainees' approach to observing and evaluating organizations' political climates and decision-making styles to find out how to run the meeting.

> That was deciding on what the objectives of the session were ... . He normally operated in a collegial style of involving the group in decisions about the running of the XYZ department program. But in this case he was deciding on behalf of the group of what the agenda for the day would be and so I didn't know whether that was going to work, whether the group would play along with that …

> Well I mean the preparation started two or three weeks beforehand. There were internal things that had to be taken care of. I had to settle the politics and get clarity about the agenda ... .

Other useful contextual information included knowing which important stakeholders were not participating in the meeting and how their absence might influence acceptance of the meeting outputs. The trainees, as meeting facilitators, required this contextual information to help them shape the meeting agenda and decide how they would conduct the electronic meetings.

Proposition 3: *External coherence requires the facilitator to understand and evaluate the political climate within the organization related to the meeting to be facilitated.*

Therefore, in the process of making the meetings externally coherent, the trainees also learned what kind of background information was necessary to interpret participants' behaviours and comments in a contextually relevant manner. Even though the trainees did not consciously focus their attention on the notion of *external coherence*, the findings suggest that this is an important issue.

Testing internal coherence

The term *coherence*, when used in electronic meetings, implies *connectedness* and *logic*. And also implied is that these logical connections – between stages of a meeting and between computing and facilitation procedures – are executed smoothly. Some trainees used the word *flow*[6] to describe these particular aspects of electronic meetings.

> … what seemed to be coming through on the last Friday's session was the flow, the sort of seamlessness between the computer supported group working and (conventional) group processes … the distinctions between them seemed to be blurring a bit.

The term *internal coherence* is proposed in this context to convey how trainees, when preparing for their first solofacilitation of an electronic meeting, attempted to link the meeting's activities in a logical, meaningful, and smooth manner. From analysis of the data three conceptual categories emerged to describe how trainees create and maintain *internal coherence*: (1) *Matchmaking*, (2) *Walking through the agenda* and (3) *Making meetings safe*. For these three subcategories of internal coherence, we developed propositions that may help in understanding our findings.

Matchmaking

Having identified a group or organization to work with, each trainee arranged a meeting with one or more persons (the *clients*) representing that organization. This initial meeting was essentially to identify the meeting's requirements, clarify the clients' and the trainee's expectations, and collect any other information to ensure the meeting would be externally coherent. Some trainees requested extra meetings until they felt ready to draft the agenda for the electronic meetings. The term *Matchmaking* was coined to describe the trainees' approach in designing an agenda that would match the requirements of their clients.

If the clients had no previous hands-on experience with electronic meetings, the trainees explained the nature of electronic meetings and what the clients could reasonably expect from such meetings. They outlined the advantages over conventional meetings. However, meeting requirements are related to participant expectations for the meeting. Thus matchmaking involves both designing an agenda that matches requirements and tempered it with reasonable participant expectations. At this stage, the trainees made their first attempt to *clarify expectations*. A trainee explains:

> Well one thing that springs to mind is how one has to be fairly precise in terms of explaining to the leader or the manager of the group who is coming to the session, exactly what the technology can and can't do. I really do think there are people out there who think the machines ultimately can spit out decisions for people and take that responsibility away from participants but I think the hardware or the software can never do that. So that's something you have to make absolutely clear to people .

Therefore, the clients had to understand the limits of that technology in a three-hour meeting. The usual client perception was that, since computers were going to be used, they could expect more than from a conventional meeting of the same length. *Many trainees found this perception difficult to refute, as they did not yet know how much they could reasonably promise the clients.*

Having collected as much information as possible, the trainees then proceeded to draft a meeting agenda. One approach was to design the agenda around the GSS tools they could use or were confident with. A trainee describes this approach:

> Researcher: Having set your agenda or rather while you were setting your agenda, you also put in those parts in which you feel the technology would be useful. What criteria did you use while deciding this? Did you use Topic Commenter and then the Vote option? Or was that reasonably obvious?
>
> Trainee Y: Well, they're the only ones I'm really comfortable with so far.

Clients' expectations that GSS tools would be used during the meeting also created another problem for the trainees. The trainees either selected *too many* GSS tools or selected the *wrong* GSS tools for achieving the meetings' objectives. Both these *inappropriate tool selections* occurred because the trainees did not have enough hands-on experience to know when and why to select certain tools. For example, in one exceptional situation a trainee drafted the agenda for a three-hour meeting using five different GSS tools, three of which belonged to the same class of tools - Voting, Rating, and Ranking. When asked why these tools were selected, the trainee responded that it would be good facilitating experience and good for the participants to try these tools. After a discussion on the criteria for deciding appropriateness and the need to match tools with the meeting tasks and objectives, the trainee realised that the tool selection was inappropriate. Here was how another trainee explained the need to keep a balance between what was required for the learning exercise and what was required to meet clients' requirements:

> I have to be very careful that I don't make the whole exercise too complex to meet my requirements but end up with nothing (for the clients) because I've made it too ambitious.

The draft agenda was sent to the clients for their input and confirmation. Some trainees presented their draft agendas in person. If changes to the agenda were necessary, the trainee made them in consultation with the client, as long as they did not threaten either the meeting's objectives or its internal coherence. The final agenda and other information about the meeting, including statements about the trainee, the Group Decision Centre, and the use of the video camera were then sent to all participants.[7] The trainees then prepared themselves for the actual meeting.

Proposition 4: *Internal coherence requires that the facilitator design a meeting agenda using appropriate GSS tools to match the meeting requirements of their clients.*

In summary, the term *matchmaking* describes the trainees' approach in designing an agenda to *match* the requirements of the clients by adequately clarifying issues concerning the use of technology, selecting appropriate tools for the meeting, and avoiding overreliance on one GSS tool.

Walking through the agenda

After the meeting agenda was designed, the trainees' next main activity was preparing for the meeting. Trainees had to be in the Group Decision Centre for several activities including: *Setting up the selected GSS tools in the computers*, *Revising the use of GSS tools*, and *Rehearsing the agenda items*. One trainee used the phrase "walking through the agenda" to describe the preparation and rehearsal for the first solofacilitation of an electronic meeting. In this step, a trainee gained confidence from having rehearsed the computing procedures and from the belief that the agenda was balanced and coherent.

> Researcher: I recall you having a walk through with the tools. Did you visualise the walk through?
>
> Trainee: Very much. That's how I work, as you know. So I tried to put myself in . . . what I did, I actually did it, not with the exact exercise but with another set of exercises and tried to work through that and visualise that and then actually doing it on the machine, going through with you, the next part is myself and that was very similar but with different wording. And then I did, going back to your question, I remember now, I did also try – part of my process in planning an agenda and thinking through how it all works and what the transitions would be – actually trying to visualise that and plan what I would say and so on.

Analysis of the data also revealed that, while *Walking through the agenda*, many trainees felt that the draft agenda did not seem quite right. The trainees seem to have sensed *intuitively* that it did not hang together, that it lacked balance and coherence. So at this late stage and without an opportunity to consult the clients, the trainees made the necessary changes to the agenda to give it better balance and coherence. In the following excerpt, a trainee described this *intuitive* sense of coherence while visualising how the meeting would run.

> It was critical to go up there the night before and just sit down and think through by visualising how it was going to go, and that's when I changed things around in [a different] order.

However, last-minute changes to the computer procedures could be counter-productive and any changes made minutes before the meeting could unsettle trainees just getting ready to start their first electronic meetings.

> At the beginning, fairly early on [in the meeting], it became very clear that I hadn't done enough preparation the night before to test the software from the participants' point of view. Because, as you'd remember, I set up all the sessions, then went away overnight to think about what sort of personal evaluation I wanted; and then when I came back in the morning, early before the session, I set up in the GroupSystems another session for the personal evaluation and forgot to change the session back to the workshop session . . .

(What happened then was that when the trainee introduced the technology to the participants, it was found that a wrong agenda item was activated and the intended meeting agenda was nowhere to be found. The trainee, after several attempts to locate the correct agenda item, requested the researcher to assist).

> … so that's one area that I'd make sure to prepare and actually go in and set up all the sessions at least a day before the workshop, and that way I can be sure that I'm logged into the right session to start with. And also (just before the start of the meeting I would check), the participants' computer screens to make sure that the participants are seeing what they should, when they should. So that was a real struggle!

Proposition 5: *Internal coherence requires that the facilitator conduct a practice 'walk through' the agenda to ensure that timings, tools, and content are appropriate.*

In summary, a trainee would use *Walking through the agenda* to gain confidence from having rehearsed an agenda and from feeling that it was still balanced and coherent.

This rehearsal session was often done the day before the trainee's first solofacilitation of an electronic meeting.

Making meetings safe

In their preparation for the first solofacilitation, the trainees *psychologically prepared themselves* for the event. If the trainees had prior knowledge that some participants were novices or apprehensive computer users, they also specifically planned to use techniques that would *make the meeting safe and non-threatening for these participants*. The aim was to make the meetings comfortable for all those who took part in it, including the trainees. Analysis of the data revealed two aspects of *Making meetings safe*: (1) *Making Meetings safe for oneself* and (2) *Making meetings safe for others*.

In *Making meetings safe for oneself*, the trainees ensured that all necessary preparation for the meeting was done and nothing was left to the last minute. As well as completing the physical preparation, the trainees also attempted to prepare themselves psychologically for the big event. Here is one trainee's approach:

> On the morning of the session I sat up in bed and went through (the session) and quietly read it and thought "I've done my best". I was actually quite calm … . I walked to work, I was walking meditatively, just looking, breathing and just really centering myself and thinking about the people coming and looking forward to make sure it was a good experience for them rather than being [just] self-focused. Up until that time my anxiety was about Am I prepared? Will I do it well? Am I a fool to offer it so quickly? . . . all those sorts of self-doubt questions. Then when I'd gone past the point of no return, that's right I, had that dreadful headache, having gone beyond that, the best thing I can do is be in a good place myself and face whatever happens so if something goes wrong I can face it and deal with it.

When the trainees arrived at the Group Decision Centre, they made sure that the seating was arranged how they wanted, the white board clean, the felt pens useable, the overhead projector in working condition, and any reading material placed on the desks.

At the same time, the trainees were also thinking about the use of the computing tools and especially thinking, "I do not want any surprises with the technology." So to assure themselves of this, they switched on all the necessary computers, went through the computer log-on procedures, and made sure that the screens showed the correct electronic meeting exercise.

> Trainee: Prior preparation in the room. Setting it up ahead of time because if things go wrong then it creates quite a pressure situation. Cue cards are helpful; they're a good idea.
>
> Researcher: Do you use them?
>
> Trainee: I usually do notes. I've got notes in my notebook . . . getting there early the day before, walking around the room, reminding myself of my technique for being able to be on top of the technology and where possible, everything loaded on to the screen.

Proposition 6a: *Internal coherence requires that the facilitator feels comfortable and confident in the use of the electronic tools and processes in the meeting.*

Using their own experience as participants of electronic meetings as a benchmark, the trainees also developed strategies to make the meetings safe and less threatening for the participants. For example, the trainees attempted to improve the *ambience* of the room by making it safe and comfortable. To create room ambience, the trainees greeted each participant as they entered the room and introduced themselves, offering coffee and other refreshments. I recalled hearing soft background music in one meeting and finding soft lighting in another. Arranging the seating to promote participants' proximity and rapport and setting the room temperature at a comfortable level also contributed to the ambience of the room. Some facilitators also made participants with varying computer skill levels comfortable with the computer tools.

Proposition 6b: *Internal coherence requires the facilitator to create a comfortable, non-threatening environment for participants in the electronic meeting.*

The whole point of these activities was to ensure that the threats to *external coherence* and *internal coherence* were avoided and that the meetings and its activities were connected, logical, and relevant for the participants and their organizations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has two main results. First, the idea of coherence is substantiated in the electronic meeting context. New electronic meeting facilitators found the concept of coherence, both external and internal, to be of value in designing and planning their first electronic meetings. Coherence helped these facilitators integrate the technology with the meeting processes. It also helped them think about how the current meeting would relate to other meetings.

The second result is a refinement and enrichment of the concept of coherence in electronic meetings. Coherence is a multi-level concept. Considering only external or internal coherence gives an incomplete picture and could result in ineffective meeting design. External coherence has a

number of facets such as "tuning into the politics" that make it difficult to sustain. Internal coherence also has a number of facets such as "matchmaking" and "making meetings safe" that provide a richer view of the factors that make a meeting a cohesive and logical unit of organizational productivity. The six propositions developed from the results of this study should provide the foundation for the development of a theoretical framework for e-meeting coherence.

This study has implications for the research and practice of electronic meeting facilitation. First, for research: Experienced conventional meeting facilitators being trained in electronic meeting facilitation noted that although the concept of *coherence* is valuable in meeting planning, more work is needed to show how external coherence is related to agenda design in a variety of electronic meeting contexts. For example, Niederman *et al.* (1996) have suggested that future research in agenda design could concentrate on "continued refinement of aids to help the facilitator not only develop a series of steps but to improve on those over time . . ." (p. 18).

Second, research is required on how, *during* electronic meetings, facilitators can achieve *internal coherence* and establish the relationship between external and internal coherence. Coherence is important in design and planning, but it may also be important during meeting processes.

Third, this study focused on how new electronic meeting facilitators used the concept of coherence, because of the fresh insights that these people would provide. Future research could examine experienced electronic meeting facilitators during their planning and design activities. As experienced electronic meeting facilitators increasingly support dispersed or *virtual* meetings, it will become increasingly important to understand how to achieve and maintain coherence.

For practice, this study indicates the need to pay more attention to both external and internal coherence if facilitators are to achieve more satisfying outcomes, both for the group and themselves. Coherence seems to be a concept that provides some structure within an inherently unstructured context – how one meeting relates to or is integrated with other meetings, and how electronic meeting tasks can be put together cohesively to make sense to all participants. Although coherence appears to be a relatively simple concept in theory, it is more difficult to apply in practice.

Finally, the concept of coherence could be used to develop guidelines to help facilitators gauge their own performance in GSS facilitation. For example, the facilitator would need to ensure that:

(a) the meeting objectives are achieved (*external coherence)*

(b) the meeting activities are logically connected (*internal coherence)*

(c) the meeting activities proceed smoothly as the facilitators make intuitive adaptations to the agenda activities when appropriate (*internal coherence)*

(d) there is a balance of computing and human interactions (*balance)*

(e) the meeting participants experience satisfaction in their involvement, enjoyment, comfort, and stimulation (*internal coherence and balance).*

These guidelines could also be used to develop measures of participants' satisfaction with electronic meetings. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to indicate how to develop these benchmarks or measures.

In conclusion, this study applied grounded action research to the study of coherence in electronic meeting facilitation. Coherence appears to be an important concept for facilitators, but more research is needed to fully understand when and how it can be applied.

Appendix A

The Components of a GSS Facilitation Training Program

The training program consists of the three modules described below.

Module Number	Title of Module	Brief Description of the Module
1	**The tools of an electronic meetings**	This module provides the necessary hands-on skills and knowledge of the GSS product (GroupSystems V).
2	**Planning and managing an electronic meeting**	This module focuses on (a) how to plan and design an agenda for an electronic meeting, (b) how to balance human and computer interactions, and (c) the role of the facilitators in electronic meetings.
3	**Putting it all together**	This practical module provides opportunities for trainees to plan and facilitate "live" electronic meetings.

The trainee facilitators studied Modules 1 and 2 during the two full-day and two half-day sessions. The practical component, "Putting it all together," took place soon after the training. The trainees were expected to demonstrate the

skills and knowledge acquired from the preceding training program. They did this by planning, managing and facilitating a "live" electronic meeting that lasted about three hours. All the meetings were videotaped and the recordings used for giving feedback to the trainees and as research data for this study.

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Notes

11 Sources for meeting facilitation skills as a key success factor in electronic meetings (Bostrom, Clawson, & Anson, 1991; Vogel, Nunamaker, Applegate, & Knosynski, 1987); for experimental and field-based studies (Bostrom, Anson, & Clawson, 1993; Beranek, Beise, & Niederman, 1993; Clawso,n 1992; Iacono, Vogel, & Nunamaker, 1990); for the importance of the interplay between socio-emotional and task issues (Kelly & Bostrom, 1995); for the balance between human and computer interactions (Iacono, Vogel, & Nunamaker, 1990); for the relationship between routine and flexible activities (Anson, 1990 and Clawson, 1992); and for the relationship between meeting facilitation and outcomes of electronic meetings (Anson, Bostrom, & Wynne, 1995).

[2] The word *trainee* is used to indicate that, even though the facilitators are experienced in conventional meetings, they are undergoing training and development in GSS facilitation. In this manner, it is hoped their extensive experience as facilitators of conventional meetings is not undermined.

[3] A period of five years' practice as a group facilitator was used as the benchmark between medium- and high-level facilitation experience.

[4] The use of only one word-processing software package and for a period of less than 5 years was the benchmark between medium- and high-level computing experience. We have subsequently found a better measure called "end user sophistication." This measure takes into account a user's breadth, depth and finesse of end user computing (EUC) experience. Breadth refers to the extent or variety of different end user tools, skills, and knowledge that an individual possesses and can bring to bear on his or her job. Depth is assessed by the completeness of the user's current knowledge of a particular EUC sub-domain (e.g. using a spreadsheet) and finesse is defined as the ability to creatively apply EUC (Huff, Munro, Marcolin, & Compeau, 1995).

[5] The term *Solofacilitation* was coined to describe the trainees' *first* attempt in facilitating a live electronic meeting *on their own.* That is, the trainee solo-performed *both* computing and facilitation procedures during the meeting. It was different from some other electronic meetings where a *process facilitator* – who looks after the meeting procedures – and a *technical facilitator* – who takes care of the computing procedures – are acting simultaneously in the meetings as co-facilitators.

[6] Ghani *et al.* (1991) used the phrase *optimal flow* to describe measures of individuals' experiences as they engaged in group work activities. They found that "individuals' experiences of flow, a state being characterised by involvement in and enjoyment of a task, were determined to be significantly greater in computer-mediated groups than in face-to-face groups" (p. 229).

[7] Several trainees reported that organization managers did not send this preparatory material to all the participants. This omission created slight problems during the early stages of the meetings as the trainees had to spend time and energy to clarify these background issues.

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Finding Clarity in the Midst of Conflict: Facilitating Dialogue and Skillful Discussion Using a Model from the Quaker Tradition

Malcolm C. Burson

Abstract

Consultants and facilitators increasingly use formal approaches to dialogue as a means to build the capacity of groups to engage at deeper levels of collective understanding. For example, the contributors to *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* propose the application of dialogue techniques to the practice fields of "mental models" and "team learning" as ways to build the skills of inquiry and reflection into the day-to-day activities of groups of all kinds. Combining the work of William Isaacs and the Dialogue Project at MIT with a model from the Quaker tradition, this paper suggests a tool for skillful discussion that can allow a group to deal with conflict by stepping back into a shared silence that generates critical questions, and describes a case example of its use.

Keywords

conflict management, facilitation, dialogue, clearness committee, learning organization

This article describes a method for assisting a group to move through conflict arising in the course of intense conversation. It represents a convergence between two in silence and waiting; and the contemporary organizational development model that falls under the "learning organization" umbrella.

The Quaker "Clearness Committee"

In the Quaker tradition, a member of the community who is unable to see the solution to a problem or moral dilemma, may ask for the help of a Clearness Committee. The role and function of the Clearness Committee is described in various Quaker publications and other books (see Hoffman 1996; Palmer 1983; Philadelphia Yearly Meeting 1997).[1] In brief, a small group of wise and trustworthy persons come together with the one asking help, and meet in a closed room. The person in need poses the situation, usually in the form of a statement such as, "My son has friends from school of whom I don't approve, but I'm afraid of turning him off by telling him of my concerns."

From this point, members of the committee have only one option: they can only pose questions. They may not offer advice or opinion, make judgments, or even "follow up" on responses made to previous questions. Once the person seeking help has answered a question, group members ask another question to deepen everyone's understanding of the situation. The inquiries are understood to emerge from the shared silence and the common mind, based on the premise that a person's inability to find a way through such problems is often a consequence of information overload and/or competing values. It's not that the person doesn't have the knowledge or ability to resolve the issue; rather, that she or he may need help sorting and seeing through to the roots of the problem. *Clearness* is achieved when the person's own resources can be focused, and the light of understanding brought to bear. As Palmer says, "Within the space of caring but incisive questioning, truth is given room to make itself known (1983, p. 83).

The gentle power of such an approach is manifest. It honors both the pain and the strengths of the person who has asked for assistance. It recognizes how overwhelming internal conflict can be, and assumes that people generally have the ability to solve their own problems and see their own solutions, if they aren't bombarded with other people's advice, expertise, or even well meant suggestions. Instead, participants must practice

intense listening to everything going on in the room. As such, it fosters the same kind of creativity as the conversational model propounded by William Isaacs, where collective inquiry creates trust and synergy.

The Bohm-Isaacs Model of Dialogue

Drawing on the insights of physicist David Bohm and others, William Isaacs of MIT has been exploring the role of conversation and collective thought in human interaction, particularly as these apply to shared learning. He sees the linguistic origins of dialogue in roots meaning "to flow through." In his understanding, dialog is the creation of common meaning through an interactive process of listening, exploring assumptions and differences, and building a context for thinking together. He describes the movement of conversation and energy from cross-purposes and collision through deliberation and discussion toward different forms of collective understanding (Isaacs 1994a, 1999*)*. While this happens whenever people converse together, this progression is particularly important when groups come together to deal with issues that are inherently likely to create conflict in beliefs and values.

In David Bohm's view, conflict emerges when fragmented thinking creates closed mental models (Bohm 1985). This in turn generates polarized, "we-they" communication dynamics, where individuals seek to present positions and ideas in order to win advantages in a zero-sum game. Unexpressed or unexplored values and perspectives of real importance to the person holding them often underpin such entrenched positions. When this happens, conflict can be understood as a response to the threat posed by competing values that confront one's cherished beliefs. By inviting people to explore the assumptions underlying both individual convictions and group dynamics, the movement toward dialogue allows them to step back from the drive to hammer out decisions or agreed positions. Disagreement then becomes an opportunity to dig deeper and seek not only consensus or common ground, but creative "third ways" that were not visible before. These may emerge as people let go of positions and beliefs instead of defending them.

In characterizing this progress in the conversational flow of meaning, Isaacs identifies two deliberate choice points as illustrated in Figure 1. The first, between *suspend* and *defend*; and the other, at the *defend* point, moving toward dialectic or debate. *Suspension* involves the willingness of participants to hold their own values, previously held positions, and mental models in front of themselves and others: to say, "maybe my way of seeing this situation is incomplete, and I'm willing to explore that with others" (Isaacs 1994b; Burson 1999). Participants draw back from assigning "right" or "wrong" labels to their own and others' ideas. Instead, they may use principles of generative thinking such as

- listening without necessarily intending to respond
- allowing space and time for ideas to rest in the presence of the group
- showing respect through questions which seek understanding (Ganswindt 1998).

Instead of suspending our mental models and ideas where they may be vulnerable, we more often seek to defend ourselves by erecting barriers behind which our ammunition is stored. In Western culture, in particular, we receive a lifetime of training in the practice of advocacy. We're taught the importance of presenting and arguing for our views and ideas. We believe that debate, by which the most strongly advocated idea triumphs at the expense of all others, is the best way to make decisions or determine right and wrong. At the same time, we neglect to learn inquiry, respectful questioning that broadens context, explores implications, and elicits alternatives. Regardless of where on the conversational path a group finds itself, the tools of skillful discussion provide a means for people to balance inquiry and advocacy. These allow self and others to make their thinking processes visible, so that listening becomes active (Ross 1994a; Ross & Roberts 1994). Instead of presenting and arguing for one's own views (the normative model of discussion in many business contexts), people intentionally seek to ask questions which explore meaning and invite collective mindfulness. Ross (1994a) summarizes the principal elements of skillful discussion as follows:

1. Pay attention to one's own intentions.
2. Balance inquiry with advocacy.
3. Build shared meaning, for example, through exploration of terms.
4. Use self-awareness as a resource.
5. Explore impasses.

When people speak together in these ways, thoughts and ideas emerge from, and are spoken into, the shared space (or container, in Isaacs's language) instead of being perceived as individual property to defend.

> The active experience of people listening, respecting one another, suspending their judgment, and speaking their own voice are four key aspects of the container for dalogue. … The container is the circle that holds all, that is a symbol of wholeness, and a setting in which creative transformation can take place (Isaacs 1999: pp. 242, 243).

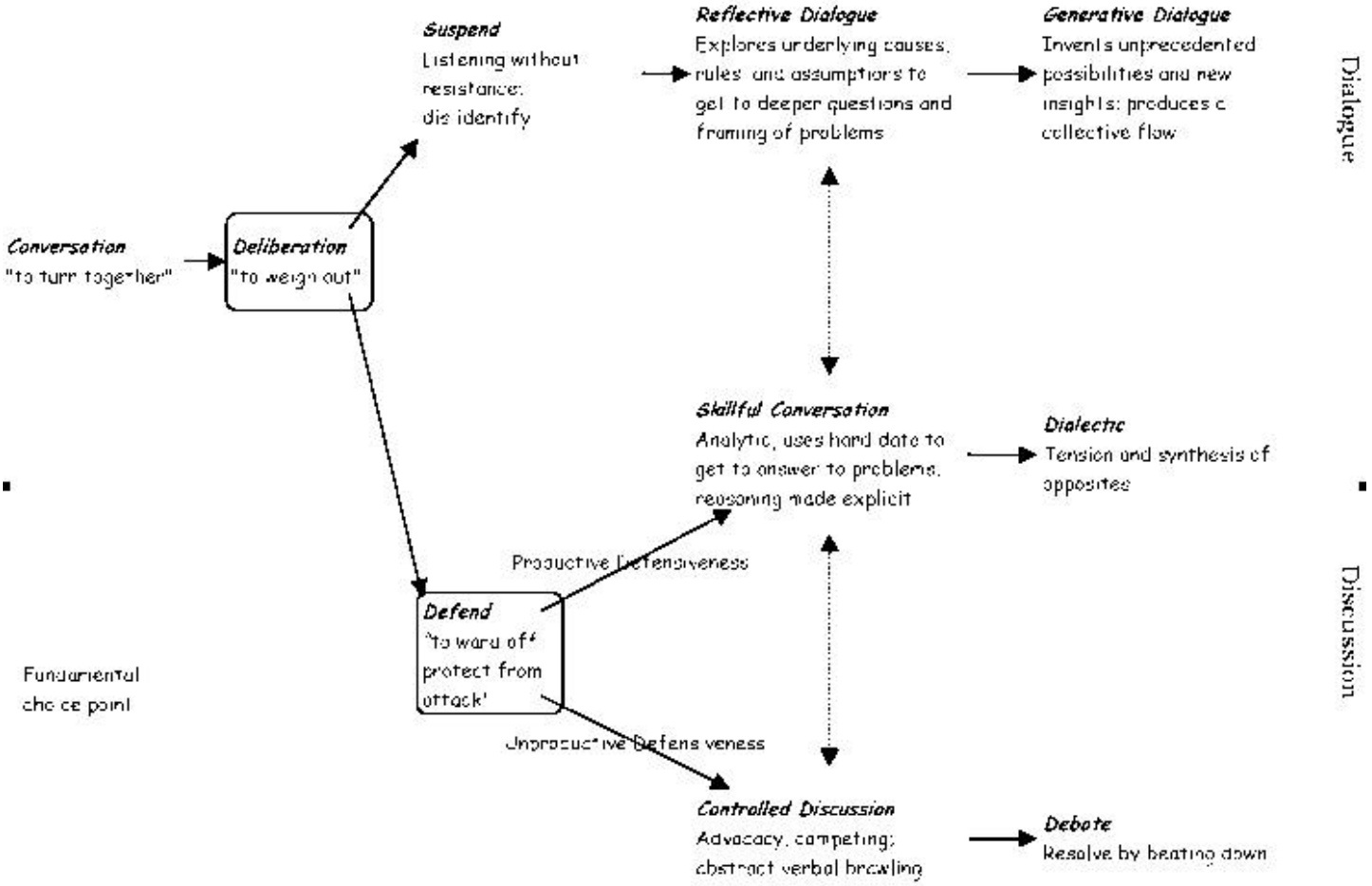

Figure 1. The divergence and dynamics of conversational paths

Adapted from D*ialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* , by William Isaacs.
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The Continuum of Movement from Discussion to Dialogue

As shown in Figure 1, Isaacs proposes a splitting of the conversational path (at the fundamental choice point labeled *deliberation*), one way using skillful conversation or controlled discussion to make decisions or solve problems, and another branch leading through the process of suspension toward generative dialogue.[2] The former, he suggests, is a method for working productively when the presenting issue or real world situation that brought people together is paramount. To him, the outcome of such conversations is, at best, dialectic, where tension is maintained in a synthesis of opposites.

> Discussion produces important and valuable results. … But it is too limited for many of the most intractable problems before us, especially those where people bring fundamentally different assumptions to the table, have reasonable differences of view, and deep investments in getting what they want. (1999: 46)

Dialogue, on the other hand, "is about exploring the nature of choice… evoking insight [as] a way of reordering our knowledge" (1999:45).

As I understand Isaacs, there's no turning back from the "fundamental choice points" shown in Figure 1. In my own practice of facilitating dialogue, however, I have come to see the relationship between the two differently. Instead of viewing *deliberation* as demanding an irretrievable bifurcation of the path, I have added the dashed lines to the figure to indicate the possibility of other movements across the field of conversation.

As described by Ross (1994a), the tools of skillful discussion (which Isaacs associates predominantly with skillful

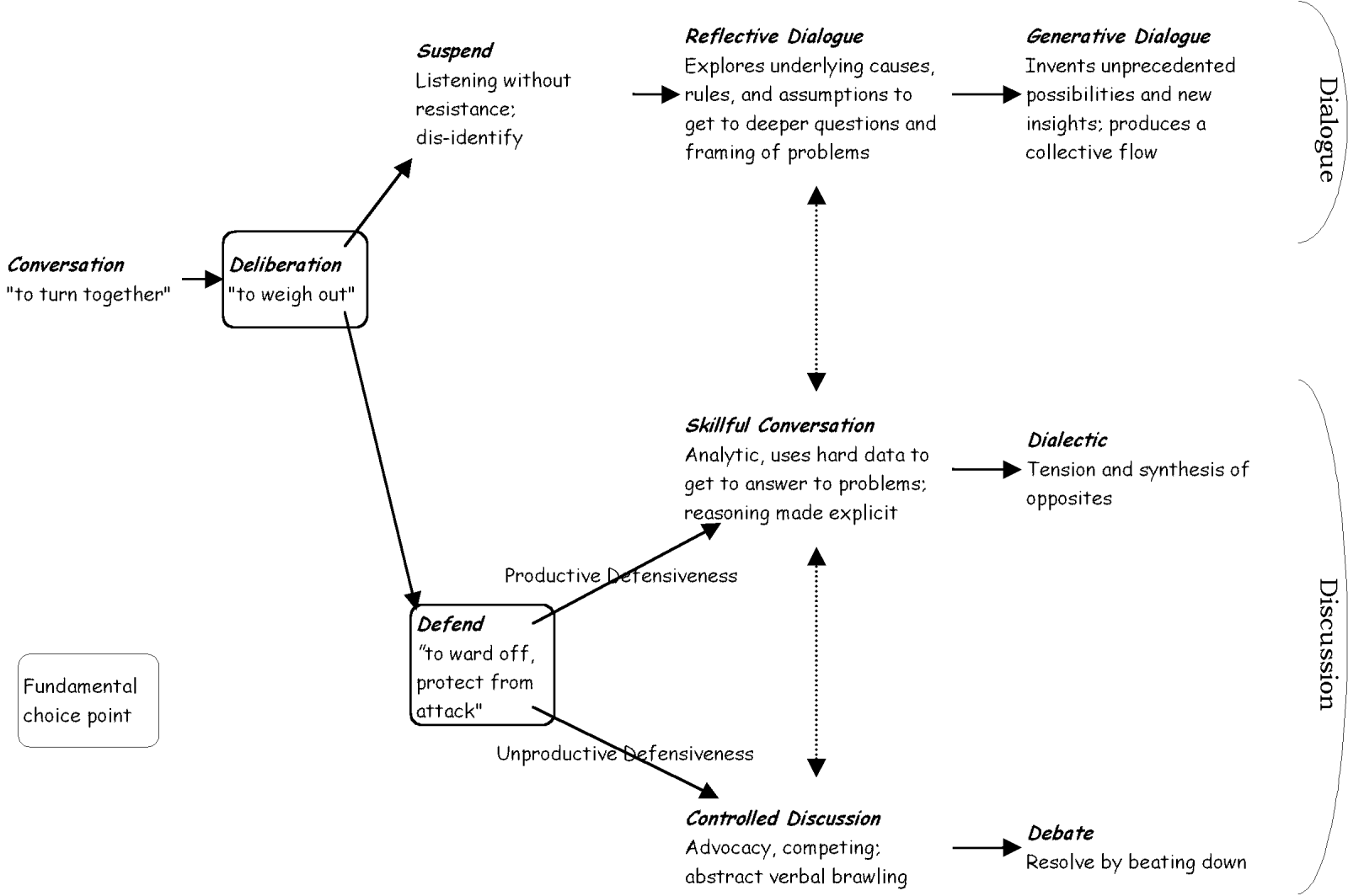

Figure 1. The divergence and dynamics of conversational paths

conversation) provide a collection of methods and tools that can be used in a range of circumstances to further a group's progress along whatever conversational path they happen to be on. If one is moving toward dialogue, use of skillful discussion can be understood as a necessary step that allows for suspending assumptions, building collective meaning, etc. If the expected end is a decision or problem solution, the same tools provide the means.[3] Finally, skillful discussion methods may serve as a fallback or safe haven when the journey toward generative dialogue is stalled. Merely because one has at a particular moment made Isaacs' "fundamental choice" toward either suspension or defense does not imply that at some other point a group may need, for example, to stand back from reflective dialogue in order to make reasoning explicit.

For instance, a group striving for dialogue can become bogged down to the point where the flow of meaning has come uncoupled from the real world situation to which the group must return. At this point, some participants will press the group to "get back to seeking practical solutions." Others may feel so overwhelmed by the intensity of feeling and mass of data generated by the process that they withdraw. The container may temporarily not feel as safe a place as before, resulting in expressions of frustration or aggressive assertion. A movement "back" toward the concrete, measured protocols associated with skillful discussion provides a way for individuals to check in with their own situational awareness ("what's going on in me right now?"), and, more importantly, to test the balance between advocacy and inquiry. This situation may arise particularly when:

- the issues which brought the group together are rooted in divergent values
- sub-groups were in conflict prior to coming together
- there is pressure from stakeholders outside the group.

The model of the Clearness Committee may help allow the group a constructive "time-out" while reminding people of the importance of suspending and exploring assumptions. Its emphasis on the value of collective silence and respectful inquiry creates the opportunity for a group to regain its center instead of splintering into competing interests. There is an intriguing parallel between the *internal* conflict experienced by a person seeking help from a Clearness Committee, and the *interpersonal* conflicts that appear in groups, whether they are task-focused or striving for dialogue and shared meaning. In both cases, individuals typically experience frustration at the apparent lack of direction, the sense of being overwhelmed by thoughts and feelings, and/or the disorienting perception that "nothing makes sense"—none of the competing ideas or values seem able to lead them out of the wilderness.

In the framework of the Isaacs model, the Clearness Committee is an exercise in skillful discussion: that is, it is focused on an issue external to the group's process, something important in the real world outside the room. Just such a circumstance led to the situation described next.

Applying the Quaker Model to Groups in Conflict: A Case Study

At a large provider of mental health services with which I worked, one 90-day residential facility conducted multidimensional assessments of severely emotionally disturbed children. The facility itself was a stressful environment for staff and clients alike, since the children's dysfunction generated very high levels of acting out, much of it physically aggressive. During their stay in this unit, children and adolescents received daily schooling in another facility of the agency, a licensed special-purpose school that also served day students who could not be maintained in regular public education settings.

Staff in the residential setting utilized a behavioral model designed to respond rapidly and effectively to behavioral escalation in individual clients, in order to minimize disruption of the larger group and its environment. Teachers in the school, on the other hand, sought to promote a learning environment emphasizing group classroom behavior. This difference in approach, rooted in profound and explicit values, can be illustrated as follows: if a child's behavior began to escalate in school, the teacher's normal reaction would be to remove the offender. The residential staff's behavioral approach, on the other hand, would be to remove everyone *else* from the scene until the child calmed down.

Since the two units had evolved separately, and had different overall goals, leadership structures, and operational values, there was constant disagreement between them, overtly manifest in conflicts over the correct approach to behavior management of particular clients. At another level, front-line staff and teachers regularly accused each other of not taking responsibility for a disruptive child, while each group claimed it alone had "the best interest of the client" in mind as its guiding principle. Eventually, the situation deteriorated to the point of explicit back-biting in the presence of clients. This was particularly unhelpful, given the nature of the children's issues and the effect on attempts to teach them positive methods for dealing with conflict. Members of each staff unit also engaged in covert sabotage to diminish the effectiveness of the other.

As an internal consultant to the agency, I suggested to both managers that intervention was necessary. After an extensive period of trust-building with each group separately we scheduled a series of meetings involving as many of the 50+ total staff as possible. Each meeting was three to five hours long. I designed an open-ended format based on Isaacs's dialogue model, with

the explicit goal of helping the participants find better ways to work together and solve problems, rather than engaging the content of the conflict. I was clear in sharing with everyone involved my perception that the conflict was rooted in value differences manifested in the structures of the two units, and not in the personalities or performance of individuals. Finally, I shared my intention to facilitate in an activist, intervention-centered manner, at least at the beginning. The work would require a willingness on their part to engage deeply held convictions, learn new skills, and confront the possibility that no one had the "right" answers.

An initial five-hour meeting resulted in some significant trust-building to the extent that many participants spoke from their own values and beliefs without the need to win debating points. As part of the process, they learned and practiced some of the techniques of skillful discussion noted above, specifically the respectful exploration of others' assumptions and ideas. Most of the major issues were named, although many people thought them unresolvable. Between this and the next meeting, all agreed to suspend unhelpful behavior and listen for the possibility of new ideas and ways of acting other than their own.

When the group re-convened, some participants, particularly supervisors and managers, expressed a strong need to "get on with it," by which they meant moving away from dialogue and the search for shared meaning toward practical problem-solving. Some of this was generated by real-world constraints, some by previously unexpressed skepticism about the efficacy of a dialogue approach, and some by fear of again releasing strong emotions in the room. But after some venting, the group agreed to review the identified issues and continue the movement toward deeper engagement. After about an hour of further conversation, the group reached what Isaacs calls the "crisis of suspension":

> Extreme views are stated and defended. All of this "heat" and instability feels distressing, but it is exactly what should be occurring. The fragmentation that has been hidden is appearing (1994a, p. 362).

In his model, this is the point at which movement into dialogue becomes possible, rather than continuing on the track of discussion that moves toward problem solving. As noted above, an alternative view sees a group moving along a continuum between the relative safety of skillful discussion and the more intense engagement required in dialogue. In this approach, the "crisis of suspension" invites the facilitator to explore alternate methods of keeping the group going.

For this group, the crisis was expressed by assertions that the whole effort was a waste of time; that the distance between the two groups was unbridgeable; and by evidence of withdrawal (posture, body language, eye contact, etc.). The facilitator's obligation in this type of situation is to help the group regain enough shared trust and intention to continue. The facilitator can best do this, according to Isaacs (1994a, p. 363) by "model[ing] in [his or her] own behavior some ways to suspend assumptions."[4] In addition to Isaacs' suggestion of pointing out the presence of polarizations in the group and exploring what they represent, I decided to invite the group into a kind of structured silence based on reflection and deep inquiry in the midst of pain.

I asked the group to take a break, suggesting that participants spend the time by themselves, and not discuss the issues that the group had been considering. I also asked whether, when they re-convened, the group would be willing to try a different approach. During the break, I created as stark and dramatic a statement of the conflict as possible. The statement was relatively impersonal, but was deliberately provocative in expressing what I perceived as unspoken realities and unexplored convictions. The statement read something like this: "School teachers and rehab staff have such totally different beliefs about what's wrong with the children we serve that each thinks the other incompetent."

When the group came back together, I offered the summary statement to the group. Since the group was by now already familiar, to some extent, with the tools of skillful discussion, I briefly described the Quaker Clearness Committee model, and asked the group to sit in silence for a few minutes to consider the statement. When the time for speaking was open, I asked them to speak only by asking questions of the statement that sought to uncover and suspend assumptions, test implicit values, or anticipate possibilities ("what would happen . . .?"). I reminded them to "speak to the center" and leave space and time after each person had spoken for her or his words to sink in to the common mind. I then wrote each question on a flip chart as it was spoken. For a time, the questions came quickly, then less often and with apparently deeper feeling. There were no spoken responses or answers, only the silence of collective mindfulness. When the silence became pervasive, I closed the speaking space, and invited the group silently to consider what had emerged.

In my experience, somewhere near the bottom of the list is a single question that truly reflects the deep causes of the conflict, the heart of the situation, a *gestalt* shared by all. In this case, the question was, "Are we replicating our kids' brokenness in our own system and behavior?" and there was an audible gasp of recognition in the room when it was spoken. The subsequent discussion was quickly framed by an analysis of what some therapists call "parallel process." This allowed everyone to see the situation in ways they could not before, and provided a way forward, in this instance toward problem-solving and real-world issues. The energy for building solutions based on shared values returned, and within a further two hours of respectful and thoughtful work the group had arrived at a series of workable

protocols designed not only to alleviate the presenting issues but to rebuild dysfunctional structures in both systems. Eventually, the two were successfully merged.

As happened here, the significant question generally surfaces at what might be considered a meta-level that does not respond directly to the originating statement, but rather to the underlying and previously unexpressed dynamics of the situation. This sort of collective inquiry emerging from shared silence demonstrates the "paradox of inquiry": that in order to speak, you must not speak. That is, the listening skills necessary to honestly pose a question that aims to build meaning for others is rooted in not speaking, either inwardly or outwardly. If, even in silence, you're carefully crafting the definitive advocacy statement that will demolish your opponent, you will not hear the other. But if you're striving to listen carefully to the verbal and nonverbal questions that others are posing from their own depths, you invest in the group's flow of meaning in ways that build trust, allow risk, and create new ways of thinking together.

Conclusion

Conflict in groups can be understood as arising in part from the threat to the individual beliefs, values, and/or convictions which underpin the ideas and assertions of group members. Facilitators have a particular responsibility to foster skills that encourage participants' capacity for respectful exploration of others' assumptions, balancing advocacy with inquiry, making one's own thinking visible, as noted above. The practices of reflective / active listening (Rogers 1995) are a useful beginning place, as are the conversational recipes of Robert Putnam (1991) and Philip McArthur (1994). Practitioners can supplement these with others from the action research model such as "the left-hand column" and "the ladder of inference" (Ross and Kleiner 1994; Ross 1994b; Argyris 1990). These practical applications are useful in a wide range of circumstances. They are of most value when a facilitator works with a particular group over time, introducing tools and skills in the context of the group's usual activity, rather than in a classroom or laboratory setting.

Of at least equal importance for the practitioner are self-awareness skills that allow "embracing all sides of any intense polarization that appears" by discovering the space between differing ideas (Isaacs 1994, p. 376). In addition to providing the facilitator with ways to see clearly and listen carefully, these "moments of awareness" ("What am I hearing? Where am I listening in myself? What do I want?" etc.) can be shared with and modeled for the participants (Ross 1994a).

While dialogue may be seen as an end in itself, it need not necessarily be so. The tools and values that support dialogue are also useful as part of a wider approach to organizational learning and development. For example, a management team could decide that the practice of dialogue would build the team's learning capacity and interpersonal effectiveness without any specific outcome in view, *a la* Isaacs. Along the way, however, "instability in the container" could produce sufficient discomfort to jeopardize the process. At this point, the facilitator might deliberately steer the group toward the safer territory of skillful discussion protocols, or even a focus on a specific external issue, until the group was ready to move on. On the other hand, a task group brought together for a long-term project, which in Isaacs' view would from its inception follow the path to skillful discussion, could easily find itself needing to move away from task focus in order to explore the deeply held beliefs and values of its members. This would offer the possibility of building a common context on which to base the return to practical applications. In this instance, the skillful facilitator can suggest ways to develop and practice the group's dialogue capacity before resuming the original direction.

However, the very nature of dialogue poses a challenge to facilitators. As Isaacs points out,

> [w]hen we are trying to move into dialogue, conventional, structured approaches to facilitation can be debilitating. … While a facilitator can get things moving, he or she must move out of a position of control so that the awareness of the process is shared by everyone (1999: pp. 331-2).

Facilitators wishing to add dialogue skills to their repertoire will benefit from participating in conversations in which they can themselves work with the building blocks noted here. The practice of listening includes becoming conscious that "what is out there is also in here": that is, that practitioners and facilitators of dialogue and skillful conversation must model the awareness that what someone else is saying or acting exists also within them (Isaacs 2000, p. 23). In particular, becoming comfortable with the practices involved in suspension, such as surfacing one's assumptions and identifying one's own place in the flow of meaning, and then naming that awareness for the group models the making visible of thought on which dialogue depends.

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Notes

[1] Although I am not a member of the Quaker fellowship, I have worshipped with Friends, and have discussed the experience of "clearness committees" with them. Interestingly, Isaacs (1999,:157) suggests the clearness committee as a practice for "catalyzing suspension in groups." This meaning of the word *suspension* is explained below.

[2] Isaacs also speaks of what he calls *metalogue*, a moment beyond words when the group *is* its meaning, as the ultimate step in the process, but does not include this in Figure 1 or the discussion of it. Without stretching the analogy too far, we might say that the traditional Quaker meeting itself, in which the silence and occasional sharings are the only meaning, demonstrates the stage of *metalogue*, a state beyond dialogue in which the "meanings and structure mirror one another" (Isaacs 1999, p. 401).

[3] Figure 1 is a further development of Isaacs' original (1994), but still retains the disjunction between discussion and dialogue. However, he modifies this point in his recent work and suggests a cycle of movements through conversational field-space, from shared monologue through "controlled discussion/skillful conversation" toward reflective and generative dialogue (Isaacs 1999, pp. 41, 259 ff.). I find this modification consonant with the work reported here.

[4] For more on the process of suspending assumptions, see Isaacs (1994b) and Burson (1999).

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Learning Organizations: A Primer for Group Facilitators

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Abstract

Learning organizations are able to grow and successfully adapt to changing environments, and group facilitators have a key role as change agents in the process. This paper draws heavily from the work of Peter M. Senge (1990a, 1990b, 1994, 1999), who describes learning organizations as consisting of four core disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, team learning and shared vision. In addition, Senge introduced a fifth concept of systems thinking. The work of several other management scientists is discussed in relation to the learning organization attributes identified by Senge, and the role of facilitators in creating organizational change is highlighted.

Keywords

learning organizations, organizational change, change strategies, organizational development, personal mastery, mental models, team building, teamwork, team learning, systems thinking, system dynamics, group dynamics, group model building, decision conferences.

Introduction

The last decade has seen the emergence of the learning organization, a new mode of organizational functioning (Senge, 1990a; Senge 1990b, Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross & Smith, 1994; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, Roth & Smith, 1999). With many traditional organizations striving to become learning organizations, top managers were left searching for ways to change employee perceptions as well as approaches to task completion. This paper builds on the belief that not only do facilitators possess exactly the values and intrinsic skills required to help facilitate the transformation needed for organizations to become learning organizations, but that most successful transformations will indeed be conducted by external facilitators (Sandelands, 1999).

We highlight Heron's (1999) definition of a facilitator as "a person who has the role of empowering participants to learn in an experimental group" (p. 1). Heron goes on to explain that an experimental group is one where learning takes place through an active and aware involvement of the whole person. As will become clear, the transformation needed in organizational members to create the learning organization involves the development and learning of the whole person with skills in accordance with Senge's (1990a) vision. We also concur with Schwarz (1994) when he specifies group facilitation as "the process by which a person who is acceptable to all members of the group, substantively neutral, and has no decision-making authority intervenes to help a group improve the way it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions, in order to increase the group's effectiveness" (p. 18).

Organizational learning involves individual learning, and those who make the shift from traditional organizational thinking to learning organizations develop the ability to think critically and creatively (Schon, 1975).[1] Organizational learning is about people and how they work together to achieve personal and organizational goals. Many times achieving goals means making changes that require creative thinking and problem solving. As previously stated, we believe these skills are in agreement with the values and assumptions embedded in group facilitation. Values held by practitioners include "wanting to create change, to positively impact people and organizations, enhance the effectiveness and profitability of organizations, [to] learn and grow, and exercise power and influence" (French & Bell, 1995, p. 77).

As with other change processes, becoming a learning organization can be aided by coaching, guidance, and consultation. In order to learn as a team, to practice systems thinking, and to develop shared vision, people in the organization must meet, share information, develop goals, and plan together. In other words, a learning organization depends on effective meetings. A group facilitator can play an important role in helping the group overcome learning barriers and move toward becoming a creative organization and a competent one where high standards, principled leadership, and a collaborative climate are a way of life.

Group facilitation is often the necessary process that allows organizations to learn how to learn and to learn how to change. Ross and Roberts (1999) recommend using external facilitators paired with internal facilitators to effect change through group work in learning organizations. As Ross and Roberts note, "External facilitators are more comfortable helping people work with unfamiliar techniques, and more apt to ask the dumb questions that reveal contradictions or difficult issues. They provide outside perspective" (p.90).

Tim Savino of Harley-Davidson says that his company uses outside facilitators with the learning teams because "these people bring technical expertise and process skills" (Senge et al, 1999, p. 92). Of course, internal facilitators are critical as well when learning teams get together because they bring an understanding of the organization and its culture and politics to the process.

In order to be effective in the role of change-agent coach, it can be helpful for the group facilitator to understand the building of a learning organization. This paper presents a primer for facilitators to use as an introduction to learning organizations. It is organized according to the five disciplines that Peter Senge (1990a) says are the core disciplines in building the learning organization: personal mastery, mental models, team learning, shared vision, and systems thinking.[2] Even though the paper makes liberal use of Senge's pervasive ideas, it also refers to the work of others such as Chris Argyris (1991, 1993, 1999, 2000), Juanita Brown (1994), Charles Handy (1994, 1995, 1998), Jon Katzenbach, and Douglas Smith (1993). What these writers have in common is a belief in the ability of people and organizations to change and become more effective, and that change requires open communication and empowerment of community members as well as a culture of collaboration. Those also happen to be the characteristics of a learning organization.

The emphasis of the paper is on reviewing the five disciplines, but it also puts them into context for facilitators. Being an introduction, it probably does not fulfill the needs of facilitators who may already be helping an organization as they grow into a learning organization. But it does shed light on the concept of facilitating organizational learning for those new to the idea. Also, we believe it will stimulate dialog and thought on the matter, possibly opening an avenue for the exchange of practical experiences. Facilitators may need to prepare further to facilitate successfully on the topic, but this paper may serve as a roadmap to that further development.

Personal Mastery

Personal mastery is what Senge describes as one of the core disciplines needed to build a learning organization. Personal mastery applies to individual learning, and Senge says that organizations cannot learn until their members begin to learn. Personal mastery has two components. First, one must define what one is trying to achieve (a goal). Second, one must have a true measure of how close one is to the goal (Senge, 1990a).

It should be noted that the word "goal," in this context, is not used the same way it normally is in management. Managers have been conditioned to think in terms of short-term and long-term goals. Long-term goals for the American manager are often something to be achieved in the next three to five years. In personal mastery, the goal, or what one is trying to achieve, is much further away. It may take a lifetime to reach it, if one ever does (Senge, 1990a). Vision is a more accurate word for it. In a videotape that Senge (1995) prepared on personal mastery, the idea of lifelong learning is represented by the story of Antonio Stradivarius, whose quest was a particular musical sound that could be produced by a violin. Stradivarius spent his entire life in the pursuit of that sound, making constant refinements to the violins he crafted, producing instruments that are considered outstanding to this day. No one will ever know if Stradivarius was fully satisfied with his last violin. Senge would say that Stradivarius was not satisfied because of his obsession with continually trying to improve on the sound. Senge refers to the process of continual improvement as "generative learning" (1990a).

The gap that exists between where one is currently functioning and where one wants to be is referred to as "creative tension." Senge illustrates this with the image of a rubber band pulled vertically between two hands. The hand on the top represents where one wants to be, and the hand on the bottom represents where one currently is. The tension on the rubber band as it is pulled between the two hands is what gives the creative drive. Creativity results when one is so unsatisfied with the current situation that one is driven to change it. Another aspect of personal mastery is that one has a clear concept of current reality. A person must be able to see reality without biases or misconceptions, and if one has an accurate view of reality, one will see constraints that are present. The creative individual knows that life involves working within constraints and will not waver in trying to achieve the vision. Creativity may involve using the constraints to one's advantage (Senge, 1990a).

Handy (1995) has a similar concept of reality in his "wheel of learning." The wheel consists of four quadrants: questions, ideas, tests, and reflection. The metaphor of the wheel makes one think of motion. What keeps the wheel moving is:

- Subsidiarity: Giving away power to those closest to the action.
- Clubs and congresses: Places and opportunities for meeting and talking.
- Horizontal fast tracks: Horizontal career-tracks that rotate people through a variety of different jobs in the new, flattened organization.
- Self-enlightenment: Individual responsibility for one's own learning.
- Incidental learning: Treating every incident as a case study from which learning can occur.
- Leadership: The driver of the wheel should be the leader of the organization, who sets the example for others to follow.

Individuals who practice personal mastery experience other changes in their thinking. They learn to use both reason and intuition to create. They become systems thinkers who see the interconnectedness of everything around them and, as a result, they feel more connected to the whole. It is exactly this type of individual that one needs at every level of an organization for the organization to learn (Senge, 1990a). Traditional managers have always thought that they had to have all the answers for their organization. The managers of the learning organization leave the responsibility for developing most of those answers to their staffs. The job of the manager in the learning organization is to be the teacher or coach who helps unleash the creative energy in each individual. In the end organizations learn through the synergy of the individual learners (Senge, 1990b).

So the question is what role do facilitators have in personal mastery? Their job in this instance might be part good listener and part coach with a healthy dose of questioner in the mix. As in any group meeting, the facilitator must be attuned to the mood and the words of the group and be prepared to monitor and adjust according to where the conversation leads. In the case of the need for personal mastery, through sensitive questioning and the ability to understand the organization's goals and mission, the facilitator can help individuals within a group see where their own need for quality in their work aligns with the organization's aspirations.

Coaching can be very helpful for groups that are new to the organizational learning process, and the ability to coach is a natural outgrowth of group facilitation skills. Pilot groups are established in organizations in order to start the learning process, but the progress made by the groups often stalls without encouragement and help. As Senge says, "Without quality coaching, guidance, and support, pilot groups began to flounder" (Senge, et al, 1999, p.103). Internal or external facilitators can serve as coaches for pilot groups, who often rely on this coaching before they ever accomplish anything significant.

For a facilitator, coaching still means facilitating and not advice giving, however. As argued by Schwarz (1994), facilitators are experts in group process, who intervene to make the group more effective, but not to influence its decisions. Facilitators themselves can practice personal mastery, by working on their continual improvement of this coaching skill. Argyris (2000) also warns that advice can be flawed, and there is a problem of "skilled unawareness" among those receiving the advice that can make professional advice ineffective (p. 48). On the other hand, coaching can help the individual with both personal mastery and creating mental models.

Mental Models

Mental models are the second of Senge's five disciplines for the learning organization (Senge, 1990a). Much of the work involving mental models comes from Chris Argyris and his colleagues at Harvard University. A mental model is one's way of looking at the world. It is a framework for the cognitive processes of our mind. In other words, it determines how we think and act. A simple example of a mental model comes from an exercise described in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (Senge, et al, 1994, p. 236). In this exercise, pairs of conference participants are asked to arm wrestle. They are told that winning in arm wrestling means the act of lowering their partner's arm to the table. Most people struggle against their partner to win. Their mental model is that there can be only one winner in arm wrestling and that this is done by lowering their partner's arm more times than their partner can do the same thing to them. Argyris contends that these people have a flawed mental model.

An alternative model would present a framework where both partners could win. If they stop resisting each other, they can work together flipping their arms back and forth. The end result is that they can both win and they can win many more times than if they were working against each other (Senge, et al, 1994). Argyris (1999) says that most of us have a common, underlying theory of action that is flawed. He says that everyone has theories of action, which are a set of rules that we use for our own behaviors as well as to understand the behaviors of others. However, people don't usually follow their stated action theories. The way they really behave can be called their "theory-in-use". It is usually to:

1. be in control,
2. minimize losing and maximize winning,
3. suppress negative feelings, and
4. act rationally (p. 303).

Argyris (1999) labels this as Model I behavior. When a problem is detected in an organization, people practicing Model I behavior correct the problem and then continue as before. He calls this single-loop learning. Fulmer and Keys say it is "maintenance learning or getting better at what we already know how to do" (p.26).

People act this way to avoid embarrassment or threat. Argyris (1991) says that most people practice defensive reasoning, and because people make up organizations, those organizations also do the same thing. So at the same time the organization is avoiding embarrassment or threat, it is also avoiding learning. Learning only comes from seeing the world the way it really is. Argyris (1993) believes that we arrive at our actions through what he calls the "ladder of inference." First, one observes something i.e., a behavior, a conversation, etc., and that becomes the bottom rung of a ladder. One then applies his or her own theories to the observation. That results in the next rung on the ladder. Subsequent rungs on the ladder are assumptions we make, conclusions we draw, beliefs we come to have about the world, and finally the action we decide to take. As we climb farther up the ladder, we are becoming more abstract in our thoughts. Unfortunately, our flawed mental models usually cause us to make mistakes in this process of abstraction, and we end up with inappropriate actions. This entire process becomes a loop. We generalize our beliefs and assumptions to the next situation we encounter and use them to filter the data that we are willing to consider. Hence, every time we start up the ladder for a new situation, we are handicapped from the beginning (Argyris, 1993; Senge, et al, 1994).

Argyris (1991) believes that people can be taught to see the flaws in their mental models. One way to do this is to practice the left-hand column technique. Below is a sample of a conversation from a real group meeting. The right-hand column includes the dialogue of the group members and the facilitator. The left-hand column includes the facilitator's thoughts and feelings as the meeting was occurring.

Facilitator's Thoughts & Feelings	The Conversation
Wow. She's not liking what I've got them doing.	Barbara: Why are we doing this?
I think this stuff is not very exciting. And they've done this kind of stuff before, and it goes nowhere. Without their boss here, it's rather futile. It's another [useless] exercise. Plus, they have such reservations about working for him.	Facilitator: This is the process we laid out given the purpose and goals of the day. Is there another suggestion you have for achieving our vision?
They won't tell the truth. I wonder how many of them really have had it, too.	Barbara: Well, we seem to not be getting anywhere. Maybe it's just me and my mood today. I'm not sure what this is going to do for us.
I'd like to tell them I wanted their boss to do the 'undiscussibles' and he vetoed it saying they can talk about anything with me. But that would be turning against him and doing so in his absence. Not good karma to do that. But, they might trust me more. Nah! Can't trust them!	Facilitator: what could I do to make it more useful?
Oh boy, now they won't want to use me as a facilitator in their organizations, if they think I can't handle them. Maybe I should have talked to them each one-on-one to build more trust. Too late for that now!!	Barbara: I don't know, you're the facilitator. I just know I have so many things to do and I don't think this is getting us where we need to go.
They participated in saying what to do today, and the agenda reflects that. Why is she acting like she wants no part of it?	Facilitator: We built the agenda around deliverables that everyone agreed to. Is this not reflecting what you thought we'd do?
Their boss was so late in getting back to me, he didn't finalize the agenda until 3 days before, which didn't give them much time. Everything always is so rushed around there! Maybe she didn't look at the agenda. Probably not. But I can't blame them, since they are so overworked and undervalued. And I know Barbara particularly wants to get a re-org going, so maybe we're not moving fast enough for her on that right now.	Barbara: No, no. maybe it's just me. I can't see this getting us anywhere.

Let's see what anyone else thinks. Moe had suggested this overall flow, which I adjusted, so what is he thinking?	Facilitator: How about the rest of you?
They are defending me, but I somehow don't completely buy it!	Moe: Well this is a process that takes time and I think we need to play it out.
I think I need a break myself to see what to do now. They are just going through this rote-like, although some of them seem to be engaged or enjoying it a bit. They did, after all, do a pretty good job on their vision posters, which showed some commitment on their part.	Facilitator: Well let's try to finish this piece and break for lunch and see how we do.

Table 1: Senge's (1990a, p. 196) left-hand column technique applied to facilitators (Schwarz, 2000)

Argyris (1999) maintains that true learning occurs when the left-hand and right-hand columns begin to match. Once one has been trained in this technique, one can do it mentally during a conversation to assess what is being said. As a culture, we have to learn to say what we think and to take criticism without being on the defensive. People and organizations learn by recognizing mistakes and correcting them. No progress can be made if we pretend that the mistakes never happened.

Research performed by Argyris (1999) shows that Model II behavior is more effective. Predictions that flow from this model are:

- if individuals hold as governing values (1) valid information, (2) informed choice, and (3) personal responsibility to monitor one's effectiveness; and
- if they accompany these governing values with action strategies of advocating, evaluating, and attributing that are crafted to satisfice[3] the governing values (e.g., craft the action in ways that encourage inquiry and testing of the validity and effectiveness of these strategies);
- then, they create consequences that facilitate learning (single-or double-loop) and that reduce organizational defensive routines in ways that the reduction persists (p. 305).

Double-loop learning "…is basically asking if we are doing the right thing" (Fulmer & Keys 1998, p. 26). It causes the organization to do more than just maintenance. The organization rethinks its set of values and begins to learn.

What an organization needs is "actionable knowledge." This is Argyris' (1993) phrase for a new set of mental models. These models would be validated through research and would be a series of if-then statements that would say something like: "...if you act in such and such a way, the following will likely occur" (pp. 2-3).

Actionable knowledge and mental models are hard to come by, though, in organizations where communication is limited and trust is shaky. In order for true innovation to happen people must come together and talk about the big goals of the organization and how day-to-day tasks carry out the goals and organizational mission. "You have to make sure that the goals of people at many levels of the organization are aligned, and that people get to know each other, before you can expect them to build trust," says Kanter (2000, p. 33).

Building trust through communication can be a major goal of facilitators working with groups that strive to be learning organizations. Facilitators can encourage work teams to talk openly and honestly, but opening up real communication can be a challenge in an organization where mixed messages are business as usual. Success on grounded communication, though, can break through barriers so that work teams can develop mental models that will lead to team learning.

Team Learning

A team, say Robbins and Finley (1995), is "people doing something together" (p. 10). It could be a baseball team or a research team or a rescue team. It isn't what a team does that makes it a team; it is a fact that they do it together. A workplace team is more than a work group, i.e. "a number of persons, usually reporting to a common superior and having some face-to-face interaction, who have some degree of interdependence in carrying out tasks for the purpose of achieving organizational goals" (French and Bell, p. 169).

A workplace team is closer to what is called a self-directed work team or SDWT, which can be defined as follows: "A self-directed work team is a natural work group of interdependent employees, who share most, if not all, the roles of a traditional supervisor" (Hitchcock and Willard, 1995, p. 4). Since teams usually have team leaders or managers, sometimes called coaches, the definition used by Katzenbach and Smith seems the most widely applicable: "A team is a small group of people

(typically fewer than twenty) with complementary skills committed to a common purpose and set of specific performance goals. Its members are committed to working with each other to achieve the team's purpose and hold each other fully and jointly accountable for the team's result" (p. 21). The focus is on the human side of organizations. It is believed that individuals who have some control over how their work is done will be more satisfied and perform better. This is called empowerment. Put these empowered individuals together into teams and the results will be extraordinary. French and Bell put it this way:

> …work teams are the building blocks of organizations. A second fundamental belief is that teams must manage their culture, processes, systems, and relationships, if they are to be effective. Theory, research, and practice attest to the central role teams play in organizational success (p. 87).

Although teams have to manage their own culture, processes, systems and relationships, and ultimately be accountable for their own results (or lack of results), they can still ask for help. Facilitators can help teams understand how their work relates to goals and to the system as a whole, and what the reasonable contributions and expectations might be for each individual within a team. When people are clear on how they can contribute, they are much more likely to be solid team members and to feel both connected and empowered in their work. It is the inability to ask for help that halts progress in many organizations, according to Senge et al, (1999). Brenneman (1999) suggests that "[w]hen a sufficient clarity of goals, roles, and expectations is established, including making people clearly accountable for the learning and performance of their subordinates, then learning is virtually automatic" (p. 389).

Characteristics of Successful Teams

Interventions are divided into two basic groups: (diagnosis and action) or (process). Team building is one type of process intervention. French and Bell consider teams and work groups to be the "fundamental units of organizations" and the "key leverage points for improving the functioning of the organization" (p. 171). A number of writers have studied teams, looking for the characteristics that make them successful. Larson and LaFasto (1989) looked at high-performance groups as diverse as a championship football team and a heart transplant team and found eight characteristics that are always present. They are listed below:

- A clear, elevating goal
- A results-driven structure
- Competent team members
- Unified commitment
- A collaborative climate
- Standards of excellence
- External support and recognition
- Principled leadership (p. 26).

How does a group become a high-performance team? Lippitt (1982) maintains that groups operate on four levels: organizational expectations, group tasks, group maintenance, and individual needs. Maintenance-level activities include encouraging by showing regard for others, expressing and exploring group feelings, compromising and admitting error, gatekeeping to facilitate the participation of others, and setting standards for evaluating group functioning and production (p. 9).

Lippitt defines teamwork as the way a group is able to solve its problems. Teamwork is demonstrated in groups by: (a) "…the group's ability to examine its process to constantly improve itself as a team," and (b) "the requirement for trust and openness in communication and relationships." The former is characterized by group interaction, interpersonal relations, group goals, and communication. The latter is characterized by a high tolerance for differing opinions and personalities (pp. 207-208).

Team Building and Team Learning

Senge (1990a) considers the team to be a key learning unit in the organization. According to Senge, the definition of team learning is:

> ...the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire. It builds on the discipline of developing shared vision. It also builds on personal mastery, for talented teams are made up of talented individuals (p. 236).

He describes a number of components of team learning. The first is dialogue. Drawing on conversations with physicist, David Bohm, Senge (1990a) identifies three conditions that are necessary for dialogue to occur:

1. All participants must "suspend their assumptions;"
2. all participants must "regard one another as colleagues;"and
3. there must be a facilitator (at least until teams develop these skills), "who holds the context of the dialogue."

Bohm asserts that "hierarchy is antithetical to dialogue, and it is difficult to escape hierarchy in organizations" (pp. 243-248).

Suspending all assumptions is also difficult, but is necessary to reshape thinking about reality. Before a team can learn, it must become a team. In the 1960s, Tuckman identified four stages that teams had to go through to be successful. They are:

- Forming: When a group is just learning to deal with one another, a time when minimal work gets accomplished.
- Storming: A time of stressful negotiation of the terms under which the team will work together, a trial by fire.
- Norming: A time in which roles are accepted, team feeling develops, and information is freely shared.
- Performing: When optimal levels are finally realized—in productivity, quality, decision making, allocation of resources, and interpersonal interdependence (p. 390).

Tuckman asserts that no team goes straight from forming to performing. "Struggle and adaptation are critical and difficult, but very necessary parts of team development" (Robbins and Finley, p. 187). To promote group interaction facilitators often use activities or games that require groups to work cooperatively (Ukens, 1997).

Team learning is a team skill that can be learned. Practice is gained through dialogue sessions, learning laboratories, and microworlds (Senge, 1990a, p. 245). Microworlds are computer-based microcosms of reality, in which one learns by experimentation. An example is SimCity, in which one literally builds a city, making all the decisions and learning the consequences of those decisions. Simulation is a tool for learning how things work, and just as important, how things might work differently.

Team Practices

Roberts (1994) declares that team learning is not team building, describing the latter as creating courteous behaviors, improving communication, becoming better able to perform work tasks together, and building strong relationships (p. 355). Just as teams pool their knowledge and then examine it from many different angles, so have the practitioners shared their different perspectives and experiences. One such "strategist" is Juanita Brown, who has coached organizations on innovative ways to involve employees. Looking back on groups with which she has worked, she recounts those experiences where team building turned into team learning. She draws inspiration from the community development movement and from the study of voluntary organizations (Brown and Issacs, 1994).

Brown relates a case study of the San Francisco Foundation, a funder of worthy causes throughout the Bay area, to show how an organization used the delightful problem of an extremely large bequest to change itself from a traditional organization into an innovative one. Hired as a long-range planning consultant, Brown organized six Commitment to the Community input sessions. What staff members heard was that this foundation didn't belong to the Distribution Committee or to the staff; it belonged to the community as a kind of community development bank and community members wanted "damm good care" taken of it. They learned that every meeting agenda should be subject to change, that there was too much structure in meetings, and that people can learn from each other. (Sibbert & Brown, 1986).

Brown in her role as a facilitator stresses the importance of dialogue as follows: "Strategic dialogue is built on the operating principle that the stakeholders in any system already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges." The "community of inquiry" can extend beyond employees to include unions, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders, becoming a "dynamic and reinforcing process which helps create and strengthen the "communities of commitment" which Fred Kofman and Peter Senge emphasize lie at the heart of learning organizations capable of leading the way toward a sustainable future" (Bennet and Brown, 1995, p. 167).

Shared Vision

A shared vision begins with the individual, and for the individual, it is held as a vivid mental image. Throughout history there are many examples of people who have had a strong vision. One example is John Brown with his vision of a holy war to free the slaves, which culminated in his attack on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859.

According to WordNet[4], a vision is a vivid mental image that is graphic, lifelike and very important to us. It is held within our hearts. The vision is most often a long-term goal, something that can be a leading star for the individual. The shared vision of an organization must be built of the individual visions of its members. What this means for the leader in the learning organization is that the organizational vision must not be created by the leader; rather, the vision must be created through interaction with the individuals in the organization. Only by combining the individual visions and the development of these visions in a common direction can the shared vision be created. The leader's role in creating a shared vision is to share the vision with the employees. This should not be done to force that vision on others but rather to encourage others to share their vision too. Based on these visions, the organization's vision should evolve.

It would be naive to expect that the organization can change overnight from having a vision that is communicated from the top to one where the vision evolves from the visions of all the people in the organization. The organization will have to go through major change for this to happen, and this is where group

facilitation can play an important role. Facilitators can help groups and organizations deal with organizational change or transformation. They can help mold organizational leadership, by mentoring high level managers and CEOs. They can facilitate group processes and discussions leading to a shared vision. Bryson's *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations* (1995) is an excellent example of the resources facilitators bring to the table when dealing with issues and challenges involved in pursuing a shared organizational vision.

Reflections on shared vision bring up the question of whether each individual in the organization must share the rest of the organization's vision. The answer is no, but the individuals who do not share the vision might not contribute as much to the organization. How can someone start to share the rest of the organization's vision? Senge (1990a) stresses that visions cannot be sold. For a shared vision to develop, members of the organization must enroll in the vision. The difference between selling the vision and enrolling in the vision is that through enrollment the members of the organization choose to participate.

John Brown had a vision of freeing the slaves. Clearly, if the slaves had truly preferred to stay enslaved, John Brown's vision of liberation could not exist. The slaves' sense of shared vision made it possible for them to die by Brown's side, but they did not die for Brown; they died for a shared vision.

Systems Thinking

In the October 17, 1994 issue of Fortune magazine, Brian Dumaine named Peter M. Senge: "Mr. Learning Organization." Why is it that in a field with so many distinguished contributors, Senge was referred to as the "intellectual and spiritual champion" (p. 147)? The reason is probably because Senge injected into this field an original and powerful paradigm called "systems thinking", a paradigm premised upon the primacy of the whole.

Humankind has succeeded over time in conquering the physical world and in developing scientific knowledge by adopting an analytical method to understand problems. This method involves breaking a problem into components, studying each part in isolation, and then drawing conclusions about the whole. According to Kofman and Senge (1995), this sort of linear and mechanistic thinking is becoming increasingly ineffective to address modern problems (p. 18). This is because, today, most important issues are interrelated in ways that defy linear causation.

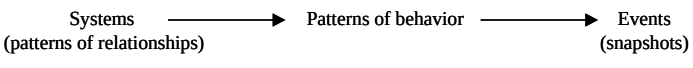
Alternatively, circular causation—where a variable is both the cause and effect of another—has become the norm, rather than the exception. For example, the state of the economy affects unemployment, which in turn affects the economy. The world has become increasingly interconnected, and causal feedback loops now dominate the behavior of the important variables in our social and economic systems. Thus, fragmentation is now a distinctive cultural dysfunction of society[5]. In order to understand the source of and the solutions to complex problems, linear and mechanistic thinking must give way to non-linear and organic thinking, more commonly referred to as systems thinking—a way of thinking where the primacy of the whole is acknowledged. Kofman and Senge add:

> The defining characteristic of a system is that it cannot be understood as a function of its isolated components. First, the behavior of the system doesn't depend on what each part is doing but on how each part is interacting with the rest ... Second, to understand a system we need to understand how it fits into the larger system of which it is a part ... Third, and most important, what we call the parts need not be taken as primary. In fact, how we define the parts is fundamentally a matter of perspective and purpose, not intrinsic in the nature of the 'real thing' we are looking at (p. 27).

Senge (1990a) identified some learning disabilities associated with the failure to think systemically. He classified them under the following headings:

- I am my position
- The enemy is out there
- The illusion of taking charge
- The fixation on events
- The parable of the boiled frog[6]
- The delusion of learning from experience (pp. 17-23).

Although each of these contains a distinct message, one can illustrate how traditional thinking can undermine real learning by following up on one example: "the fixation on events." According to Senge (1990a), fragmentation has forced people to focus on snapshots to distinguish patterns of behavior over time in order to explain past phenomena or to predict the future.[7] This is essentially the treatment used in statistical analysis and econometrics, when trying to decipher patterns of relationship (structure). However, this is not how the world really works. The causes of behavior are the interactions between the elements of the system's structure. In diagrammatic form:



It is commonly recognized that the power of statistical models is limited to explaining past behavior, or to predicting future trends *as long as there is no significant change in the pattern of behavior observed in the past*. These models have little to say about changes made in a system until new data can be collected and a new model is constructed. Thus, basing problem solving upon past events is, at best, a reactive effort.

On the other hand, systems modeling is fundamentally different. Once the behavior of a system is understood to be a function of the structure and of the relationships between the elements of the system, the system can be artificially modified and, through simulation, we can observe whether the changes made result in the desired behaviors. Therefore, systems thinking, coupled with modeling, constitutes a generative (rather than adaptive) learning instrument. Thus, according to Senge (1990a):

> Generative learning cannot be sustained in an organization if people's thinking is dominated by short-term events. If we focus on events, the best we can ever do is predict an event before it happens so that we can react optimally. *But we cannot learn to create* (p. 22).

The Fifth Discipline, A Metanoia

Systems thinking represents a major leap in the way people are used to thinking. It requires the adoption of a new paradigm. Although some say there is no such thing as a learning organization, one can articulate a view of what it would stand for.[8] In this sense, a learning organization would be an entity which individuals "would truly like to work within and which can thrive in a world of increasing interdependency and change" (Kofman & Senge, p. 32). According to Senge (1990a), systems thinking is critical to the learning organization, because it represents a new perception of the individual and of one's world:

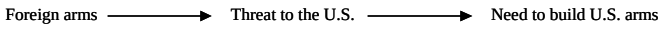
> At the heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind—from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something 'out there' to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality and how they can change it (pp. 12-13).

Systems thinking requires learning new skills and mastering new tools. Plus, it requires that not just one, but many organizational members acquire them. Thus, Kofman and Senge refer to learning organizations as "communities of commitment."

Systems Thinking Skills and Tools

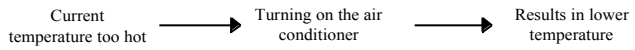
At the foundation of systems thinking is the identification of circles of causality or feedback loops. These loops may be reinforcing or balancing, and they may contain delays. But before we "close" the loops to distinguish among these new terms, let's examine two examples of flawed (or incomplete) thinking that take into account only partial relationships between elements of systems.

The first example is a unilateral perception of the arms race.[9] The word-and-arrow diagram below illustrates, from the point of view of an American, the logic behind building U.S. armaments:



The diagram can be read as follows: The more foreign arms, the greater the threat to the United States and, thus, the greater the need to build U.S. arms to defend the country from these potential aggressors. This open-loop view suggests that U.S. arms are a defensive response to the threat posed by other nations: "If only the other nations would reduce their armaments, then so would the United States."

The second example has to do with adjusting the temperature in a room during a hot summer:



For all of us who know about the developments of the Cold War, or who have experienced first-hand the extremely cold temperatures inside movie theaters in mid-July, it is no surprise that these two perceptions tell only part of the story. Yet, if asked to tell the whole story, many of us would draw alternative open-loop diagrams instead of complementing these. Over time, systems thinkers developed conventions to illustrate relationships and to capture the whole story in just one diagram, using feedback loops. Moreover, they found it useful to distinguish between stories such as the ones told above, by identifying the class of systems the story belongs to.

Reinforcing Feedback

The arms race is an example of reinforcing (or positive or amplifying) feedback. Not only do more foreign arms increase U.S. arms, but more U.S. arms also tend to provoke increases in foreign arms. One reinforces the other:

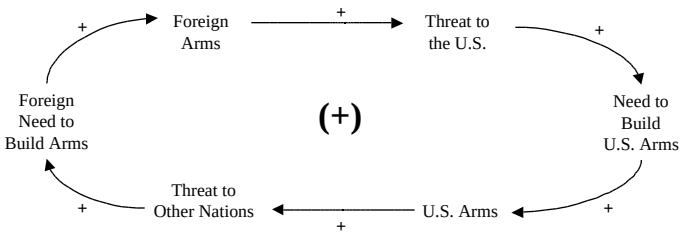


Figure 1: A system's view of the arms race.

Although reinforcing feedback is commonly labeled as positive or amplifying, this does not carry any value judgment. It simply means that a change in one part of the system causes a change in another part of the system, which in turn, amplifies the change in the first. Things do not always have to grow either. For example, a reduction in foreign arms will reduce the threat to Americans, which will probably cause a reduction in U.S. arms, which is likely to lead to further reductions in foreign arms (since U.S. threat to foreign nations is reduced). By itself, reinforcing feedback leads to either exponential growth or decay.

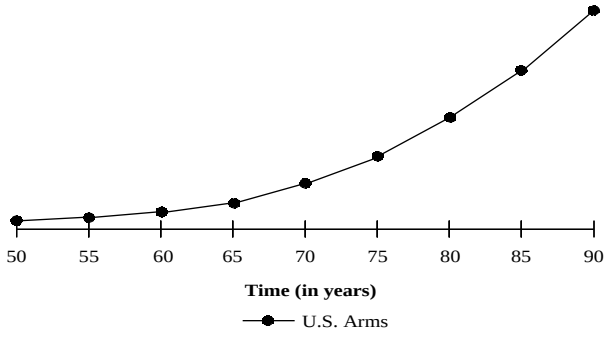


Figure 2: Exponential growth example from arms race.

Balancing Feedback

Air-conditioning a room to bring down its temperature is a classic example of balancing (negative or controlling) feedback:[10]

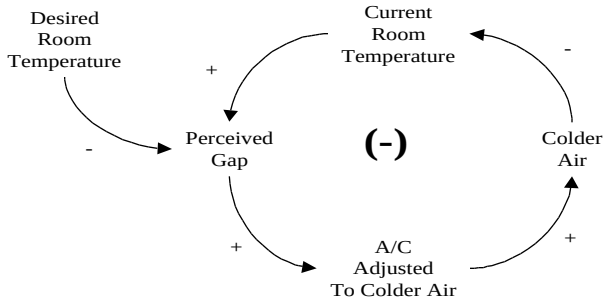


Figure 3: A system's view for setting the air conditioner.

If the perceived gap is positive, i.e., current room temperature is greater than desired room temperature; the air conditioner is adjusted upwards to increase the flow of colder air, thus reducing the gap. This is a balancing system because more adjustment means less of a gap, not more (i.e., the effect of the original change is balanced, as opposed to amplified). The leverage point in this system is the desired room temperature. If it is set too low, as seems to be the case in shopping malls and movie theaters, the resulting room temperature may be too low for the casual wear people tend to use during the summer. By itself, balancing feedback leads to goal-seeking behavior.

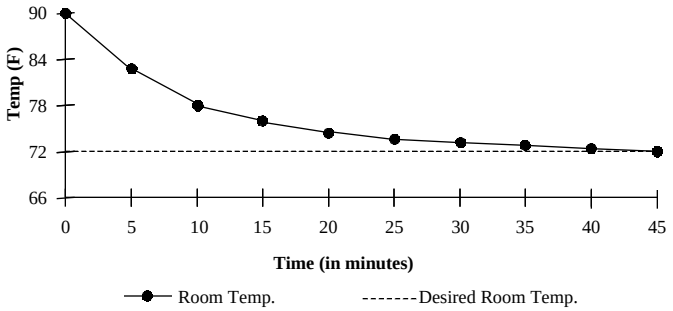


Figure 4: Goal-seeking behavior: example with air conditioner.

Delays

The time dimension is another factor that tricks people who fail to think systemically. For example, because it takes time to build up foreign arms, an American may not perceive that action as resulting from a response to increases in U.S. arms, but rather as an independent aggressor's initiative. Thus, a more accurate representation of the arms race would be:

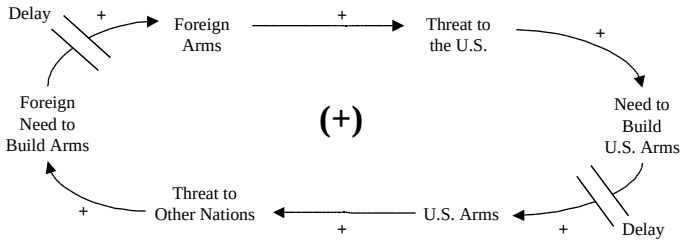


Figure 5: A system's view of the arms race with delays.

Sound systems thinking requires the utilization of a combination of reinforcing and balancing feedback loops and the accurate identification of delays. Complex systems are composed of multiple feedback loops laid upon one another. Often, the behavior of the variables in these systems can only be

understood through simulation. But, before we discuss simulation, let's recognize the existence of certain archetypal structures which are commonly found, and for which behaviors are already somewhat well understood.

System Archetypes

A number of classes of system structures are found commonly in a variety of settings. They have been studied, and their patterns of behavior and leverage points have been identified. Senge discusses them in *The Fifth Discipline* (1990a):

- Balancing process with delay
- Limits to growth
- Shifting the burden
- Eroding goals
- Escalation
- Success to the successful
- Tragedy of the commons
- Fixes that fail
- Growth and underinvestment (pp. 378-390)

The arms race discussed previously could be used as an example of the "escalation" archetype if we told the story using two balancing feedback loops, instead of just one large reinforcing feedback loop:

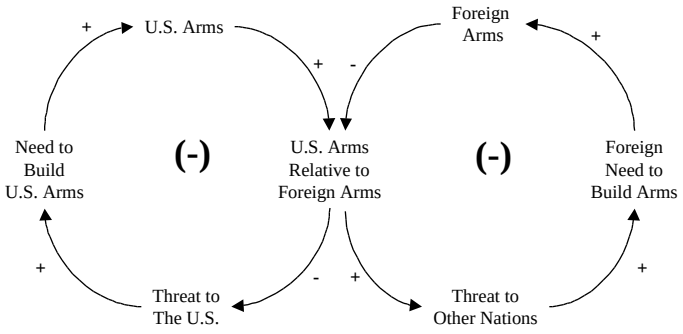


Figure 6: Arms race as an illustration of the "escalation" archetype.

The management principle derived from it is to look for a way for both sides to win since continued competition would lead to great costs and inefficiencies (Senge, 1990a, p. 384).

When system archetypes apply, it becomes easy to focus on high leverage points and to identify and avoid symptomatic solutions to real problems. This is because the analysis that serves as the foundation for the archetypes has already been done. On the other hand, when the systems under study are more complex because they are composed of a combination of structures, it becomes important to build models and to simulate to confirm assumptions about behavior.[11]

Modeling and Simulation [12]

Model building involves the mathematical formulation of mental models about the interrelationships between important elements in a complex system, for the purpose of examining the behavior of the variables of interest. A great deal of modeling training, and experience is required to build good models, even simple ones. Usually, when modeling work is required, skilled modelers are involved in the analysis to serve as the interface between those who know the system (the clients), and the modeling technology. Rohrbaugh (2000) describes how modeling and simulation have been useful, in decision conferencing and in improving decision making by management groups. He describes a model building approach grounded upon a *team* of facilitators, and the utilization of facilitation *scripts.*[13]

Formal models serve the function of a learning laboratory for managers. In the case described by Rohrbaugh, a flight-simulator (or micro-world) was built as an interface to the system dynamics model. Other examples of computer simulation micro-worlds are People Express, Boom & Bust, and Fish Banks.[14] The objective of these micro-worlds is to help users understand the nature of the system at hand, and to extract lessons about how to improve the conditions of the system, or how to avoid problems inherently associated with the systems because of the nature of their structures.[15]

Organizational Learning

If we embrace the idea that systems thinking can improve individual learning, by inducing people to focus on the whole system, and by providing individuals with skills and tools to enable them to derive observable patterns of behavior from the systems they see at work. Then, the next step is to justify why systems thinking is even more important to organizations. Here, the discipline of systems thinking is clearly interrelated with the other disciplines, especially with mental models, shared vision, and team learning.

Patterns of relationships (or systems) are derived from people's mental models—their perceptions about how the relevant parts of a system interact with one another. However, different people have different perceptions about what the relevant parts of any one system are, and how they interact with one another. In order for organizational learning to occur, individuals in the

organization must be willing and prepared to reveal their individual mental models, contrast them to one another, discuss the differences, and come to a unified perception of what that system really is.

This alignment of mental models can be referred to as developing a shared vision. It is possible that mere discussion among individuals may lead them to a shared vision but, because problems are often too complex, usually this exercise requires the aid of some skills and tools developed by systems thinkers. Whether simple or elaborate frameworks are used (from word-and-arrow diagrams to computer simulation), they are essential instruments to developing a shared vision.

When a group of individuals who share a system also share a vision about how the components of that system interact with one another, then team learning becomes possible. First, they learn from one another in the process of sharing their different perspectives. There are many organizational problems that can be solved simply by creating alignment. For example, cooperation is a lesson that is often learned by people who recognize that they belong to different interdependent parts of the same system. Second, people learn together by submitting their shared vision to testing. When complex dynamics exist, a robust shared vision allows organizational members to examine assumptions, search for leverage points, and test different policy alternatives. This level of learning often requires simulation. However, if the problems faced by the organization are among commonly observed patterns that have been previously studied, archetypal solutions may be available to deal with them more quickly and easily.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper we have tried to highlight the importance of the participation of skilled facilitators in exercising each of the disciplines. The facilitators' role, however, will depend upon the needs presented. Group facilitators bring to the tasks inherent capabilities, but the facilitator interested in applying the specific skills and tools offered in the learning organization literature will need to do one of the following. They may want to master the specific tools and skills themselves, or possessing working knowledge, they may want to team up with experts in this field, as in the decision conferencing example provided by Rohrbaugh.

In any case, there remains the challenge to the group facilitator of how to apply these concepts. Senge et al (1994) tried to answer the question, "What do we do on Monday morning?" first with *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (p.5) and now with *The Dance of Change* (1999), which is subtitled *The challenge of sustaining momentum in learning organizations.* With the latter book efforts to provide practical guidance continue. Argyris, the "father of organizational learning," (Fulmer & Keys, p. 21) believes that researchers must be of help to practitioners, that all social science research must be actionable. In the second edition of his famous book, *On Organizational Learning*, (p. 415-431), Argyris presents his "maps for action."

The goal of the authors in this paper was not to identify all of the important sources for mastering skills and tools related to the learning organization framework. But, rather to highlight the importance of the learning organization framework that brings together disciplines often treated separately. The concept of the learning organization arises out of ideas long held by leaders in group facilitation, organization development, systems thinking, and system dynamics. In describing the learning organization and its principles, this paper posits that facilitators are ready to take on the challenge of transforming traditional organizations into learning organizations. This becomes especially clear in the writings of Webne-Behrman (1998), who suggests that the core values of facilitation stem from the belief that people are capable of solving problems they encounter as long as they are empowered. Learning organizations hold the same beliefs and provide employees with the tools to actually solve problems to the best of their abilities and for the best of the whole organization.

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Notes

[1] This is the earliest reference found to organizational learning

[2] Because Senge is so influential in the field of learning organizations, his book *The Fifth Discipline* is cited here frequently. All references to it are indicated in parentheses as his 1990a work.

[3] Rational behavior limits alternatives explored, so "optimizing is replaced by satisficing" according to March & Simon, p.169.

[4] Online Lexical Database by researchers at Princeton, based on the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1928).

[5] Kofman and Senge argue that fragmentation is a cultural dysfunction of society because it is a byproduct of its past success (p. 17).

[6] If a frog is placed in a pot of boiling water, it will jump out. But if it is put in warm water that is gradually heated, the frog will just get groggy and eventually boiled. This is apparently a myth debunked some time ago by Fast Company's consulting Debunking Unit. See http://www.fastcompany.com/online/01/frog.html.

[7] One may argue that the excessive focus on snapshots (events) has obscured attention to the distinction of patterns of behavior over time, i.e., that the snapshots are being treated as discrete and disconnected rather than elements in a time series. In this case, in order to detect the pattern, one has to abandon (or overcome) the "event-itis" and take a longer look. System dynamicists propose, as one of the first exercises in problem elicitation, the drawing of "reference modes" (patterns of behavior over time) for the key "problem" variables (Saeed, 1998). They usually argue for a longer time frame to compensate for the client's tendency to focus on the recent past or future.

[8] Kofman and Senge argue that "organizational learning" has become the latest buzzword in management, and that there is no such thing as a "learning organization" (p.31). Instead, the term represents a category created in language, and something of a vision for creating a new type of organization (p.32).

[9] The arms race example was extracted from Senge (1990a, pp. 69-73).

[10] The diagram and the graph presented in the text (Figures 3 and 4) were assembled by the authors. However, the thermostat case can be traced back to at least 1948 (Wiener, pp. 96-97). It can also be found in the book that lay the foundation to the field known today as System Dynamics (Forrester, p. 15) as well a recent text by Sterman (2000, pp. 785-786).

[11] Archetypes are condensed_versions of systems analyses. The fact that they are condensed and widely applicable presents both a virtue and a potential vice. The risk presented is that the less experienced systems thinker may unfittingly apply an archetype to a particular case, or wrongly interpret it. A more severe problem may occur, if the archetypes are introduced in ways that suggest to people that conclusions about complex systems can be drawn solely and directly from applying archetypes, without actual modeling and simulation. Sterman (1994) presents a strong argument that only through simulation can we learn "in and about complex systems." Moreover, some experienced modelers argue that model formulation and simulation are always needed, because systems thinking alone (i.e., "mental stimulation") cannot correctly link structure to behavior, even in reasonably simple systems (Peterson & Eberlein, 1994).

[12] Systems modeling and simulation are the subject of System Dynamics, founded by Jay W. Forrester in the early 1960s. For more information see Richardson (1996). For a discussion binding system dynamics and systems thinking, see the special issue edited by Richardson, Wolstenholme, and Morecroft.

[13] See also Richardson and Andersen (1995), and Andersen and Richardson (1997).

[14] Each of these micro-worlds captures the dynamics of different systems, with different behaviors, leverage points, principles, and lessons. For example, the People Express flight-simulator is based upon a case of "limits to growth." The Boom & Bust game, on the other hand, deals with the oscillatory dynamics of the business cycle. Fish Banks is modeled after the "tragedy of the commons" problem. For more information, see http://web.mit.edu/jsterman/www/ and http://www.unh.edu/ipssr/Lab/FishBank.html.

[15] There is a commonly used micro-world that is not computer based called The Beer Distribution Game. This board game is a role-playing simulation of a supply chain, and it illustrates an oscillatory system (Sterman, 2000, p. 684). It is available from

the System Dynamics Society. For more information, see www.systemdynamics.org.

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Participatory Rural Appraisal: A Brief Introduction

Lance Robinson

Abstract

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is an approach to facilitating community development whose family of techniques — such as Venn diagrams, matrix ranking, and matrix scoring — rely heavily on visualization and diagramming. However, what distinguishes PRA more than any of its techniques is its emphasis on participation. PRA practitioners generally believe that only when participants are in full control — of needs assessment, goal-setting, planning, policy-making, implementation, and evaluation — can a process be considered fully participatory. PRA, which emerged first in the global South, is increasingly being used in developed countries, and it is in this commitment to participation that PRA has the most to offer facilitators practicing in the North. Facilitators using any approach are encouraged to ask themselves reflective questions such as, *Are my actions and methods as a facilitator contributing to the ability of the participants to take control?*

Key words

rural development, appraisal, community meetings, matrix, community, participatory rural appraisal, rapid rural appraisal, participatory learning and action

Introduction

Because the many methodologies for facilitating group endeavors in scanning, planning, decision making, and team building have been developed in diverse and often unconnected contexts, the opportunities for mutual learning and cross-fertilization are great. This is particularly true across the regrettable divide that separates many of those practicing in the global South, or so-called "developing countries," from those in the North. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is an approach to facilitating community development that emerged in developing countries and is as yet little known among facilitators practicing in the North. It is hoped, therefore, that a description of the history, principles, and techniques of the PRA will benefit those interested in group facilitation in any context.

In 1992, Robert Chambers, one the most well-known proponents of PRA, described it as "a family of approaches and methods to enable rural people to share, enhance, and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan, and to act" (p. 1). While the particular focus on rural settings has for the most part been set aside, the definition is still apt, and even when Chambers gave this definition, he and other practitioners of PRA had already moved beyond mere "appraisal."[1] *This paper, after outlining an example of a typical PRA process, briefly describes the history of the approach. This is followed by a discussion of the PRA practitioner's understanding of the term participation, and then a description of two commonly used PRA techniques. The paper concludes with a series of reflective questions that PRA practitioners, or indeed facilitators using any approach, might ask themselves about their praxis.*

History

Because of the emphasis on ongoing learning and on adaptation to the needs of each particular situation, there can be no blueprint for all PRA processes. A PRA process can focus on an entire community, on particular sectors or stakeholder groups in a community (or across several communities), or on an organization. It can be applied to "communities of place" or "communities of interest." For those readers unfamiliar with PRA, it may be useful to briefly list the components of a typical PRA process. For example, the staff of a non-governmental organization (NGO) using PRA over a period of several months to assist the members of a small community to analyze their socio-economic situation and needs, to plan and take action, and to evaluate and reflect might typically do the following:

1. **Introductory visit** – NGO staff spend a few days living in the community, conducting informal interviews, identifying community-based organizations and marginalized segments of the population
2. **Identification and training of local co-facilitators** - community-based organizations identify members to act as co-facilitators; NGO staff give special attention to ensuring that marginalized groups are represented, and then provide training
3. **Data collection and analysis** of history and current situation in small groups - NGO staff and local co-facilitators, over a few days, work with subsets of the population — e.g., women, men, youth, different ethnic groups, farmers, herders
4. **Community meetings** - small groups present their findings to the community, local and NGO facilitators lead further discussion and analysis
5. One or more community-based **organizations identify and plan** actions, assisted by local co-facilitators
6. Community-based **organizations implement plans** - occasional meetings are held to monitor progress
7. **Evaluation** - some weeks or months later, with assistance from NGO staff, members of community-based organizations gather and analyze data to evaluate their activities
8. **Community meeting** - results of evaluations are shared, and local and NGO facilitators assist with analysis and discussion of further action

In working through the process, some sessions are conducted in small impromptu gatherings, others in pre-planned meetings with selected participants, and others in general community meetings. Facilitators make use of many of the group techniques that are associated with PRA, including time lines, seasonal calendars, mapping, wealth ranking of households within the community, Venn diagrams of the community's institutional context, transect walks to observe the natural and built environment, and a variety of scoring and ranking techniques. PRA practitioners generally agree, however, that PRA cannot be equated with these techniques. For example, one popular manual for PRA trainers emphasizes instead the emergence and gradual acceptance within development agencies of the belief that empowerment and participation are critical to all development efforts:

> The popular and visible image of PRA is the array of techniques that have emerged [since the mid-1980s]…. However, methods are only part of a wider shift being seen within development agencies, both government and non-government. These have much more far-reaching and radical implications than the adoption of particular approaches.(Pretty, et al., 1995, p. 69)

Manuals such as the this one, as well as the most respected PRA trainers, typically put as much emphasis on facilitators' attitudes, biases, and behaviors, as they do on any of the techniques they commonly use.

The PRA approach originated primarily among non-governmental organizations in South Asia and East Africa. Its diverse ancestry, however, includes the methods used in the anthropological work of the Manchester School in southern Africa from the 1940s (Pretty, et al., 1995, p. 70), and participatory research (e.g., Freire, 1968; Fals Borda, 1979). Chambers (1992 p. 2) names five traditions which have had a significant influence: activist participatory research, agro-ecosystem analysis, applied anthropology, field research on farming systems, and Rapid Rural Appraisal.

The relationship of PRA to this last methodology — its most immediate and direct predecessor — illustrates the values that led to its emergence and that still guide it. Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) is a collection of techniques developed by rural development practitioners for the collection of useful agricultural, social, and cultural data on their target populations without the unwieldy investment of time usually required for formal, scientific studies, traditional anthropological participant observation, and tedious and often inaccurate questionnaire surveys. In the RRA approach, researchers work more closely with subject populations than has been typical of agricultural research. Together with the local beneficiaries, they undertake such activities as diagramming aspects of the farming system and drawing maps of a village's farming land and other natural resources. With these techniques, Chambers writes, Rapid Rural Appraisal:

> was, and remains, less exploitative than extractive questionnaire surveys where much is taken by the outsider, and little or nothing is given back. All the same, like most past farming systems research, its normal mode entails outsiders obtaining information, taking it away, and analysing it.(1992, p. 9)

During the mid-1980s, many RRA practitioners began to emphasize participation and to speak of "participatory RRA" as a distinct sub-type (Chambers, 1994, p. 957). By the late 1980s, the term *Participatory Rural Appraisal* had emerged. The PRA repertoire includes several of the RRA techniques, and the difference between the two approaches lies not in any of the techniques but in the emphasis that PRA places on participation. This is the distinction between extracting information versus assisting participants to assemble, analyze, and use information for their own purposes; the distinction between the agenda of the outside agents versus that of the people they are ostensibly attempting to help.

The emphasis on participation is closely linked to, and is sometimes in tension with, a concern about power relationships — between the community of participants and outside structures such as government or NGOs; between groups

of participants within the community; and within groups of participants at the level of group dynamics. This concern influences, for example, decisions about how groups will be constituted during a PRA process. A relatively common approach is to have separate sessions for various stakeholder groups within a community — for instance, women, men, and youth — and later in the process to hold a plenary session at which each group can present its findings, recommendations, etc. Working in this way can be an important means of helping marginalized segments of the community to develop some confidence and solidarity before having to speak before those whom they perceive as more powerful. PRA practitioners, aware that communities are not monolithic and are often characterized by significant disparities in wealth and power, may need to identify stakeholder groups themselves in a non-participatory way, often before doing almost anything else. While general participation is, on the whole, desirable, they must also ask themselves, "Participation by whom and for what?"

Participation: Policy and Program Planning

This emphasis on participation applies at two levels, the policy and program planning level and the facilitation and group process level. PRA's conceptualization of the terms *participatory* and *participation*, as they apply to policy and program planning, has benefited from attempts to identify when participation is in fact merely *involvement* and to form frameworks that emphasize understanding where control lies in planning processes. For example, PRA practitioners have borrowed Sherry Arnstein's "ladder of participation" (1969) to express their understanding of participation. A similar typology of participation, based on experience applying PRA in developing country contexts, has been advanced by Jules Pretty (1995)[2] is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: A Typology of Participation (Pretty 1995)

Typology	Characteristics of each type
1. Manipulative participation	Participation is simply a pretence, with "people's" representatives on official boards who are unelected and have no power.
2. Passive participation	People participate by being told what has been decided or has already happened. The administration or project management makes unilateral announcements without listening to people's responses. The information being shared belongs only to external professionals.
3. Participation by consultation	People participate by being consulted or by answering questions. External agents define problems and information gathering processes, and so control analysis. Such a consultative process does not concede any share in decision making, and professionals are under no obligation to take on board people's views.
4. Participation for material incentives	People participate by contributing resources, for example, labor, in return for food, cash or other material incentives. Farmers may provide the fields and labor, but are involved in neither experimentation not the process of learning. It is very common to see this called participation, yet people have no stake in prolonging technologies or practices when the incentives end.
5. Functional participation	External agencies see participation as a means to achieve project goals, especially reduced costs. People may participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to the project. Such involvement may be interactive and involve shared decision making, but tends to arise only after major decisions have already been made by external agents. At worst, local people may still only be coopted to serve external goals.
6. Interactive participation	People participate in joint analysis, development of action plans and formation or strengthening of local institutions. Participation is seen as a right, not just the means to achieve project goals. The process involves interdisciplinary methodologies that seek multiple perspectives and make use of systematic and structured learning processes. As groups take control over local decisions and determine how to use available resources, they have a stake in maintaining structures or practices.
7. Self-mobilization	People participate by taking initiative independently of external institutions to change systems. They develop contacts with external institutions for resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used. Self-mobilization can spread if governments and NGOs provide an enabling framework of support. Such self-initiated mobilization may or may not challenge existing distributions of wealth and power.

According to this perspective, a meeting, workshop, or other group event in which everyone present is involved and has an opportunity to speak and to be heard, cannot be said to be participatory if the agenda is set by the facilitators or the agency that employs them. In other words, participation is more than mere involvement in some sort of interactive group event, and any intervention in which the supposed "beneficiaries" of the process do not have significant power and control, cannot legitimately be called PRA. Only when the participants are in full control — of needs assessment, goal-setting, planning, policy-making, implementation, and evaluation — can a process be said to be fully participatory.

The task of achieving and institutionalizing true participation in the context of non-governmental organizations working in developing countries has been one of PRA's biggest challenges, and one of the greatest obstacles in this pursuit has been intra-agency culture. PRA practitioners have identified such problems as:

1) Development agencies adopting only the outward form of PRA techniques and applying these techniques mechanistically (Pretty, et al., 1995, p. 65) or in isolation from larger decision making processes

2) Development agencies or their funders allowing insufficient time for a truly participatory process (Gibbon, 1999, p. 74)

3) Agencies making it difficult for local people to integrate their needs, once expressed, into a specific project framework and the agency's bureaucratic system (Arasu, 1997, p. 87)

4) NGOs, like governmental and UN agencies, cannot but have their own agendas. Beyond this, most agencies also bear some responsibility to funders. Therefore, ensuring that programs are participatory has involved finding the common ground where agency goals and the goals of the target population intersect.

One technique that helps define agency-community and facilitator-participant relationships and identify common goals, is to develop early in the PRA process, "a formal commitment as to what each party agrees to do and when they will do it" (Gibbon and Shrestha, 1998, p. 27). Attempts to realize meaningful participation at the level of policy and program planning have also contributed to an emphasis, among many agencies, on local institution-building (Pimbert, 1999, p. 75). Successful local institution-building programs enable beneficiaries to more effectively negotiate, plan, and pursue their own development goals, not only as individuals but also as organizations and communities, thereby making their participation more fruitful. One way in which some agencies attempt to ensure that their own institutional climates are favorable to participatory approaches such as PRA is to relax rigid program timelines and evaluation indicators and adopt open-ended processes "of participatory appraisal and planning; allowing time for negotiation and bargaining between various stakeholders" (Pimbert, 1999, p. 77).

Participation: Group Process and Facilitation

At the level of facilitation and group process, the emphasis on participation is characterized by the maxim "pass the stick." Over the years, development efforts have suffered from too much of the expert syndrome – the "expert" who comes to the village as a sort of visiting schoolmaster, pointing his baton at strange flip-charts and posters, as he attempts to deposit information into the heads of the uneducated peasants. The schoolmaster/expert must be persuaded to give up his baton, to pass the stick to "local experts" who will use it to point out what they feel to be important and to draw maps and charts on the ground for the mutual education of all.

While the aims of individual PRA practitioners may vary, a widely shared perspective, and the perspective that underlies this paper, is that the goal of PRA is the empowerment of its participants. This goal is achieved, at least in part, by allowing the participants, collectively, to take control. This is what "passing the stick" means. In working with groups, methods are preferred that do not require overly complex or rigidly structured sequences of activities and active facilitator involvement at every step. Ideally, the facilitator fades into the background as quickly as possible. A common activity typically used in analysis and problem-identification, for example, is the creation of a map of the participants' community. This can be accomplished with minimal facilitator involvement — an initial explanation followed by occasional probing questions. This is not to say that effective facilitation is not important, only that PRA tends to favor facilitation of a non-interventionist variety.

The importance of "passing the stick" was illustrated for me during an experience facilitating a session with a group of about eighteen recent immigrants in a North American city. For one of the activities, the participants were divided into three groups of six, a facilitator encouraging each group, after ample discussion of the difficulties that they had faced as immigrants, to depict their difficulties in a collective drawing. I was not involved in this particular exercise, and was able to sit back and watch as one of my colleagues, a novice facilitator, led his group in a very animated discussion. Then, as he explained that they were now to draw, on the flip-chart paper on the table in front of them, a picture showing or symbolizing some of the ideas they had discussed, silence descended upon the group. He explained the exercise again, paraphrasing himself. A longer silence. Then another of my colleagues, who, like me, was sitting out, noticed

that this group's marking pens were still sealed in a box. The only pen that was out of the box was in the novice facilitator's hands as he fiddled nervously with it. The colleague beside me passed the novice a note: "Put the pen down!" He did, and in a moment one of the participants tentatively picked it up and suggested something that their drawing might contain. The others nodded, and within another minute the other pens were out of the box, the participants busy at work, needing no further instructions.

That facilitators should to a certain extent disengage and pass the stick is a central principle of PRA. It emerged, in part, from the discovery by early PRA practitioners working in rural, developing country contexts, "that villagers have a greater capacity to map, model, quantify, and estimate, rank, score, and diagram than outsiders have generally supposed them capable of" (Chambers, 1992, p. 20). Facilitation in this mode requiresthat the facilitator have confidence in the ability of the participants as well as a great deal of patience, humility, and detachment. For this reason the approach has been described as "both an attitude and a methodology" (Joseph, 1991, p. 132).

Some Group Techniques Used in PRA

While, as noted above, PRA cannot be simplistically equated with any of the group techniques that are typically associated with it, these techniques *are* the primary vehicle for carrying out PRA. Many of these group techniques have been borrowed from elsewhere, such as brainstorming and Nominal Group Technique. Other techniques, however, are more closely identified with PRA, and two of these are described below; but even these do not represent part of a standard facilitator tool kit. Facilitators are encouraged to adapt, improvise, and be creative, and while some techniques might be considered *typical* of PRA, there are no *standard* techniques. What is standard is the use of techniques appropriate to the particular situation and materials, props, and recording methods appropriate to the local context. In rural village settings in developing countries, for example, maps and charts are usually created not on paper but on the ground, using seeds, stones, or sticks.

Matrix Ranking and Matrix Scoring

Matrix ranking and matrix scoring are typically tools for analysis of a problem or issue. According to the situation, the list of objects to be ranked or scored may be the logical result of an earlier part of a planning process or an earlier PRA exercise, or they may be elicited from the participants at the time. After the objects have been identified, seed varieties, ideas for income-generating activities, the NGOs serving the community, or whatever, the next step is to discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of the objects. Usually during such discussions, participants begin to speak, at least implicitly, of the criteria on which they are basing their assessment of the objects. The next step is to identify these criteria and make them explicit. In the example shown in the figure below, drawn from work done in the Gambia, the objects to be ranked were various ways that rural people would save and invest; the participants identified several criteria - profitability, safety and security, and accessibility or convertibility.

The matrix is constructed with these two sets of elements, the objects to be ranked or scored forming the rows and the list of criteria the columns. Depending upon what is appropriate for the context, the matrix may be drawn onto flip-chart paper — preferably on a table or on the floor in front of everyone rather than hanging on a wall — or traced in the dirt with a stick. The objects and criteria may be indicated with words, or, if the participants are not literate, with appropriate symbols, or with both.

Then, column by column, according to group consensus, each cell in the matrix is filled with a number representing a rank or a score. In the matrix scoring example shown in Figure 1, five ways of saving were identified. These correspond to the "objects" referred to above. In addition, three characteristics were identified, corresponding to the "criteria." Focusing on one criterion (column) at a time, they came to a consensus on a score from one to ten for each object They depicted scores by pebbles

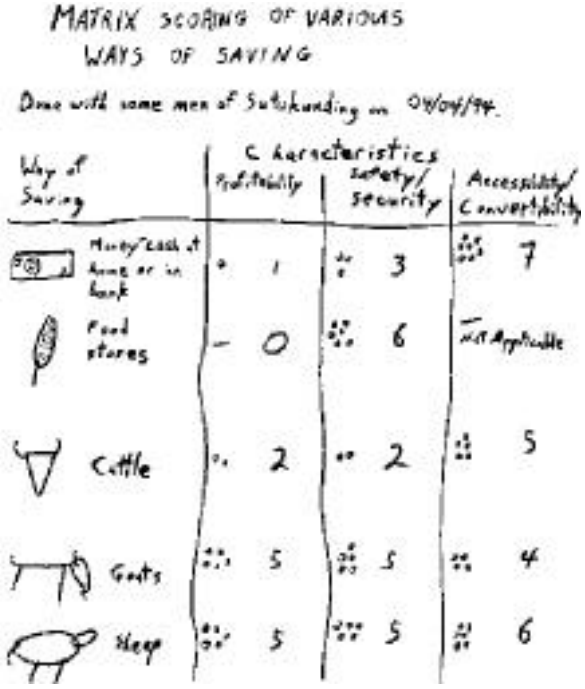
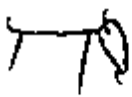


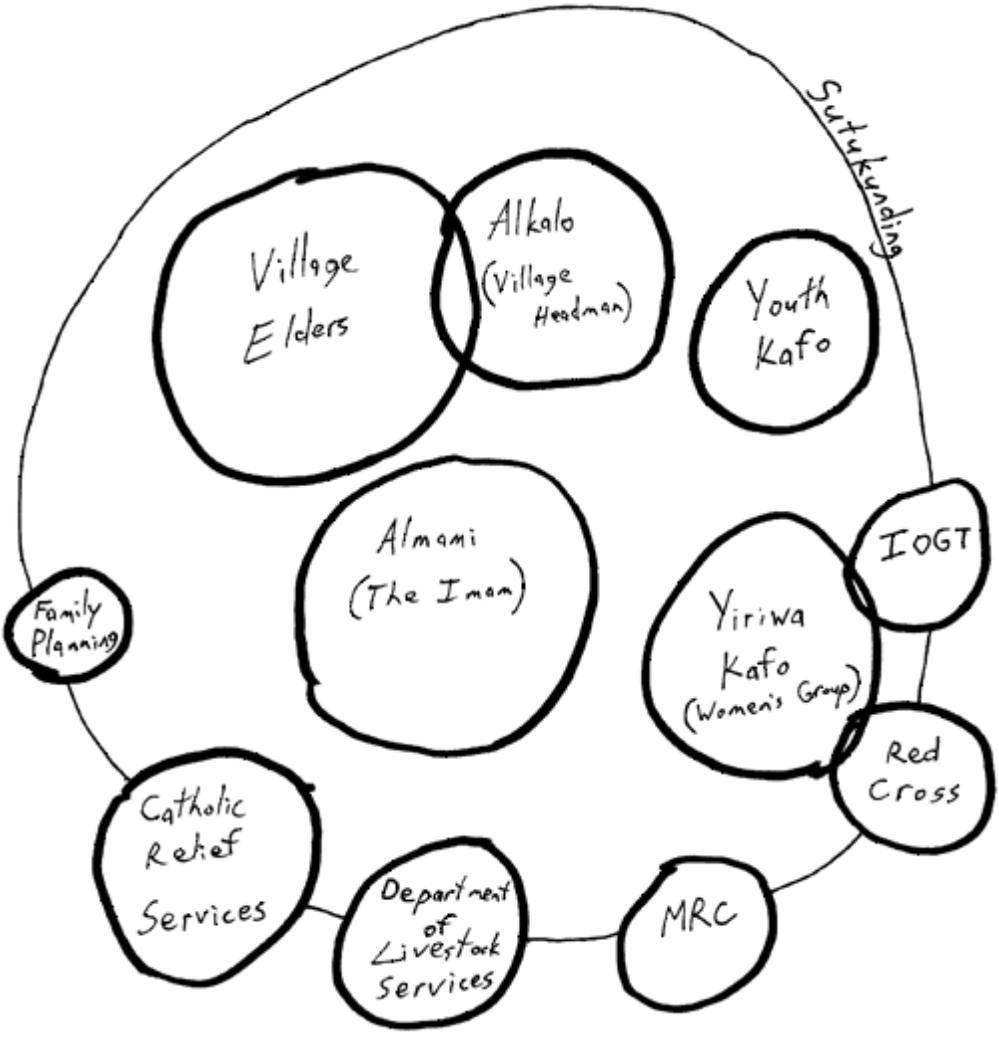
Figure 1 : Matrix Scoring

Hand-drawn facsimile of a matrix scoring chart done in Sutukunding, The Gambia, during discussion of land tenure, livestock ownership, and livelihood security.

MATRIX SCORING OF VARIOUS WAYS OF SAVING

Done with some men of Sutukunding on 04/04/94.

Way of Saving	Characteristics: Profitability		Safety/ Security		Accessibility/ Convertibility	
 Money-cash at home or in bank	°	1	°°	3	⁘	7
 Food stores	–	0	⁘	6	Not Applicable	
 Cattle	°.	2	••	2	⁖	5
 Goats	⁘	5	⁘	5	⁖	4
 Sheep	⁘	5	⁘	5	⁖	6



Venn Diagram for Sutukunding

Done with some women on 05/04/94.

as well as a numeral. In another variation of matrix scoring, the participants are given a fixed total number of points for each column to distribute among the objects as they wish. If the objects are to be ranked rather than scored, for each criterion the least beneficial or preferred object is given a "one", the next is given a "two", and so on. In both matrix ranking and matrix scoring, the values assigned to each cell are marked at first with some type of moveable counter, such as beans, pebbles, or poker chips, rather than with written numerals. This allows the participants to quickly and intuitively see the entire chart at once, and also makes it possible for the group "to change its mind" as the discussion progresses.

In keeping with the maxim "pass the stick", it is important for the facilitator to disengage to an extent, allowing the participants themselves to decide how to represent the objects and criteria, and to place the counters into the matrix cells themselves. The facilitator's role, beyond simply explaining the mechanics of the matrix, is to animate and provoke discussion. At the end of the activity, if the matrix has been drawn in the dirt or constructed in some other temporary way, one or more participants are asked to copy it onto paper so that the information can be saved for any follow-up activities. Typically, however, the value of the exercise lies as much in the discussion it generates as in the data in the matrix.

Venn Diagrams

Venn diagrams, also known as *chapati* diagrams or pizza diagrams, assist participants in visualizing relationships among institutions. Participants are first asked to identify important institutions that operate in or affect their village, neighborhood, own organization, or some other relevant community or region. They then rank these institutions according to how important or influential they are. If a particular issue is being investigated, they can rank the institutions according to their specific influence on that issue. Then the names of the institutions are written on paper circles of various sizes (prepared by the facilitator beforehand), with the most important institutions represented on large circles and the least important on small circles. When a significant number of the participants are illiterate, some sort of graphical symbol is used in place of, or in addition to, the written name of the organization.

A large circle to represent the village, neighborhood, or the participants' own organization is drawn on a sheet of flip-chart paper or the ground, and the paper circles are placed on the diagram in relationship to it. As in the Venn diagram from mathematics, the circles are made to overlap according to their degree of contact in the real world. Those institutions that are local — local community groups, departments within the participants' organization, etc. — are placed completely within the large circle. External institutions that affect the participants' community or organization are placed overlapping the border of the large circle.

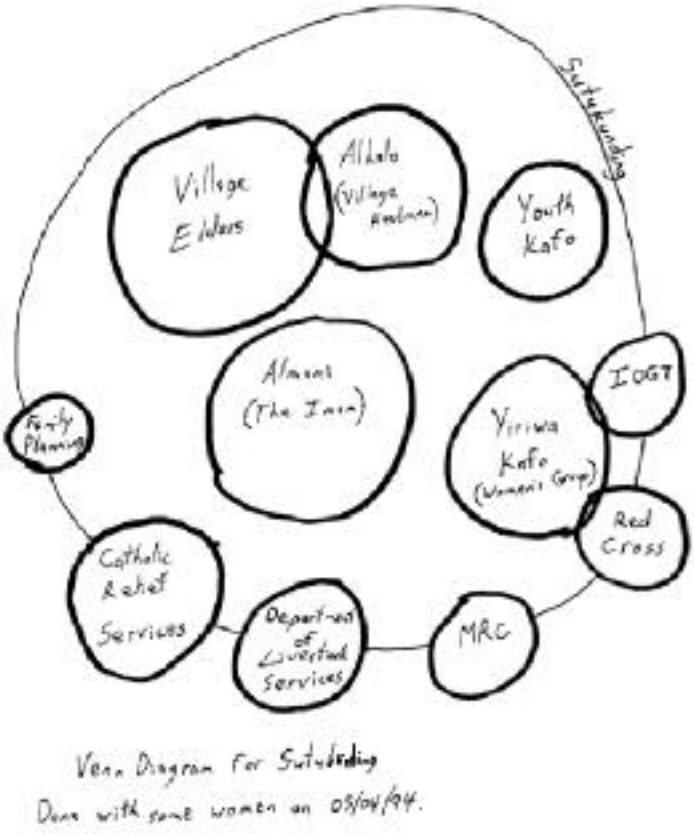


Figure 2 : Venn Diagram

Hand-drawn facsimile of a Venn diagram done in Sutukunding, The Gambia, during discussion of land tenure, livestock ownership, and livelihood security.

As with the other group techniques used in PRA, much of the value of the diagram that is created lies in the discussion and new ideas that it generates. The Venn diagram can also be used as the first step in a larger analytical process. For example, participants can be asked to identify detailed criteria by which they would assess the importance and success of the institutions in their diagram, and then to rank each institution either in a matrix, or by placing seeds, poker chips, or some other counter directly on the paper circles. The Venn diagram also helps identify and visualize differences in perception among subgroups of a community. For example, small groups of men, women, and youth respectively (or of managers and workers, or any other relevant subdivisions) can be asked to each create their own Venn diagram for later comparison with the others. It is not uncommon, for example, to find that men and women have very different ideas as to which institutions working in their community are important and successful.

Challenges for PRA and Prospects for the Future

The challenge of institutionalizing PRA and participatory approaches in general, has been mentioned above. A related challenge has resulted from *participation* having become a buzzword in international development circles, so that PRA has become quite fashionable among development agencies. This has led to a number of agencies and practitioners adopting only the outward form of PRA, using the techniques mechanistically without understanding what participation really means. One result has been that many agencies have continued to implement projects and programs that do not reflect the needs of their supposed beneficiaries. A certain degree of disillusionment among both beneficiary communities and funding agencies has followed. Many PRA trainers have responded to this problem by emphasizing training that is ongoing and context-specific, as opposed to discrete, one-off training *events*, and focusing not on PRA techniques but on incorporating the principles of participation into the trainees' work.

PRA was, in part, a reaction against the expert syndrome, and the focus of PRA processes has been largely on the articulating participants' knowledge, making it community knowledge, and then analyzing and utilizing it within the community. A continuing challenge for PRA has been finding appropriate ways to integrate outside and expert knowledge into participatory processes. A key aspect of meeting this challenge (expressed in deceptively simple terms) has been assisting engineers, agronomists, and other experts to *listen* and to appreciate the knowledge of the local experts. A related issue is the way that education intersects with the facilitation of community and economic development. One of the most interesting and promising developments in this regard has been the emergence of REFLECT, a method of literacy training that combines the Freirian theoretical framework with the PRA methodology (*PLA Notes*, 1998, no. 32 — entire issue).

PRA is no longer practiced only in developing countries or only in rural areas. In fact, *PLA Notes*, a popular journal on PRA and participatory approaches generally, will devote an entire upcoming issue to experiences using PRA in the developed North. But if PRA has a contribution to make for practitioners in the North who are using other facilitation approaches, it lies not in the PRA techniques, as effective as some of these may be, but in PRA's conception of and commitment to participation. In this connection, skilled PRA practitioners ask themselves a number of questionsthat a facilitator using any approach might well ask.

- Where does the meeting or event that I will be facilitating fit within larger decision making processes?
- What kind of "participation" am I facilitating? (cf. The typology of participation advanced by Pretty, et al., 1995.) Are my actions and methods as a facilitator contributing to the ability of the participants to take control over decision making and their ability to self-mobilize?
- Will this particular technique that I plan to use require active facilitator direction and control at every step, or will it allow me to disengage and "pass the stick"?
- Is my role as facilitator empowering people or am I promoting a new type of expert knowledge and a new type of dependence?

Selected Contacts and Sources

There are numerous useful sources of information on PRA. A few particularly good ones follow.

pra@listserv.uoguelph.ca — Internet discussion forum on PRA and on Participatory Learning and Action in general. For information: www.oac.uoguelph.ca/~pi/pdrc/discuss.html

www.iied.org — The web site of the International Institute for Environment and Development. Includes a searchable database on Participatory Learning and Action, and information on a number of publications that can be ordered.

www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/index.html — The web site of the Participation Group at the Institute for Development Studies in Sussex, U.K. Includes links to other useful sites, downloadable papers on various topics related to PRA and participatory approaches generally, and contact information for participation networks in over fifty countries.

www.oac.uoguelph.ca/~pi — The web site of Participatory Initiatives. Includes numerous links to a wide variety of information on PRA and facilitation generally. A good starting point for Internet searches.

www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html — Action Research resources site at Southern Cross University of Australia

PLA Notes — Formerly known as *RRA Notes*, this is the key journal for practitioners of PRA. For subscription information contact: Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods Programme, International Institute for Environment and Development, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H ODD, United Kingdom; e-mail: sustag@iied.org

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Notes

[1] The growth of the approach beyond the limits of mere "appraisal" and of exclusively rural settings is reflected in the emergence of a new term, *Participatory Learning and Action* (PLA). This new term is used by some as a replacement for the term *PRA* (Cornwall and Wellbourn, 2000, p. 17) and by others as "an umbrella term for a wide range of similar approaches and methodologies, including Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), Participatory Action Learning Methods (PALM), Participatory Action Research (PAR), Farming Systems Research (FSR), Méthod Active de Recherche et de Planification Participative (MARP), and many others." (Source: *PLA Notes*, editor's message on inside front cover, all recent issues.) In this paper I have adopted the latter understanding, and therefore, in referring to the specific methodology that is the subject of this paper, I continue to use the term *PRA*.

[2] It should be noted that such typologies, while useful in many respects, are also problematic, implying that the most comprehensive forms of participation are always preferable, oversimplifying real world situations, and giving insufficient attention to power dynamics within groups of participants. See Guijt and Shah 1998.

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What Do We Mean By Facilitation*

Brian Auvine, Betsy Densmore, Mary Extrom, Scott Poole, and Michael Shanklin

Editor's Note

As the International Association of Facilitators engages in developing a statement of values and code of ethics for group facilitators, it is enlightening to review this introductory chapter to A Manual for Group Facilitators, first published nearly 25 years ago. In it the authors define the term facilitation and explicity incorporate "The Values We Stress" and a "Code of Responsibilities: Ethics for Facilitators."

We have all had the experience of being involved with other people in some kind of group that has a particular purpose: Parent Teacher Associations, church youth groups, bridge clubs, classes in school, civic committees, family. In some of the groups you have belonged to, you have probably been called on to fill some kind of leadership function, whether it be leading a worship service, coordinating a conference, functioning as a resource person, or being an elected official in the community. Each of these leadership functions varies in the formality of the role and in the amount of authority that the role carries.

There is a wide variety of ways for the functions of leadership to be performed. Many groups have one person who is designated the group leader. That person takes responsibility for what occurs in group gatherings. He or she has been delegated power to take initiative and responsibility for calling meetings, acting as chairperson, planning agendas and perhaps to make day-to-day decisions for the group. This is the most common form of group leadership. An alternative form, however, is for the leadership functions to be spread throughout the whole group and for all members to share in these responsibilities. This manual is about how to work with this kind of group, about how to be a leader in a group where all members share in decision making and responsibility. The kind of leadership we will be describing – *facilitation* – is designed to help make groups perform more effectively by soliciting the leadership skills and potential of all members.

The term *facilitation* has been used in different ways by different people. We use the term to mean a certain kind of role in a group, which is associated with certain values. In this introductory section, we will define what we mean by *facilitation* and we will identify the values and responsibilities we attach to this role. Everything we say in this manual is written from the perspective that we describe in this first chapter.

The Values We Stress

Facilitation, as we describe it, works best when certain values are accepted and practiced not only by the facilitator, but by the entire group in which facilitation occurs. These values are the basis behind the guidelines and suggestions we present throughout this manual. As facilitator, it is your responsibility not only to demonstrate these values in your own behavior, but to foster them in the group you are facilitating.

a. Democracy

Each person has the opportunity to participate in any group of which he or she is a member without prejudice; the planning of any meeting is open and shared by the facilitator and the participants; the agenda is designed to meet participants' needs and is open to participant changes; and for the period of time during which the facilitator is working with the group, no hierarchical organizational structure is functioning.

b. Responsibility

Each person is responsible for his or her own life, experiences and behavior. This extends to taking responsibility for one's participation at a meeting. As facilitator, you are responsible for the plans you make, what you do, and how this affects content, participation and process at the session. You are also responsible for yourself and for what happens to you. You must be sensitive to how much responsibility the participants at any meeting are prepared and able to take. Through experience, participants can learn to take an increasing amount of responsibility.

c. Cooperation

The facilitator and participants work *together* to achieve their collective goals. (One might say that leadership is something you do *to* a group; facilitation is something you do *with* a group.)

d. Honesty

As facilitator you represent honestly your own values, feelings, concerns, and priorities in working with a group, and you should set the tone for an expectation of honesty from all participants. This also means that you must be honest with the group *and* with yourself about what your abilities are. You must represent yourself fairly and not attempt to go beyond your own capabilities in the role of facilitator.

e. Egalitarianism

Each member has something to contribute to the group and is provided a fair opportunity to do so; you (the facilitator) understand that you can learn as much from the participants as they can from you. (At the same time, any participant has the right to choose *not* to participate at any particular point in a meeting.)

What a Facilitator Does

Within the kind of group outlined above, a facilitator's job is to focus on how well people work together. The purpose of this focus is to ensure that members of a group can accomplish *their* goals for the meeting. The facilitator trusts that each member of the group can share responsibility for what happens, whether it involves calling the members to remind them of the next meeting, making sure that each person has an opportunity to contribute to a discussion, or seeing that the agenda serves the group's purpose. The effect of this sharing can be to equalize the responsibility for the success or failure of the group (in whatever way that group has defined its goals and function) and to allow more people to have control in determining what happens within the group and what decisions are made.

A facilitator can fulfill different kinds of needs in working with a group. This is determined by the group's purpose for coming together and by what is expected of the individual who will act as facilitator. For example, you have been asked to give a presentation on your area of expertise (e.g., regional planning) to a group of interested citizens. The purpose of the gathering is entirely informational. As facilitator-resource person, you can affect the dynamics of the discussion by how you present your information, what kind of atmosphere you set within the group (open vs. closed, light vs. intense) and by the attitude you show toward the people you are working with. A very simple nonverbal cue – where you sit – can affect how comfortable people feel in a discussion following your presentation. If you sit at the front of the room facing an audience that is seated in rows, and have a podium in front of you, you have both a spatial distance and a physical barrier (an object to hide behind) between yourself and the rest of the group. The others are less able to challenge you, and you are protected from hearing what they say. In addition, their attention is focused primarily on you, not on each other. This gives you a great deal of authority. On the other hand, if you can sit among the other participants, with them around you, this will physically equalize the relationships and ease interaction. The purpose of your role as resource person-facilitator is to share information, not to set yourself above the group as an expert. By being open to questions and soliciting feedback, you can accomplish this as well as learn something from the others yourself. This simple example will, we hope, demonstrate a few facets of what facilitation can be like.

One need not be labeled "facilitator" in order to employ facilitation techniques in a group. Any group member can call the group back to the subject of the discussion, interrupt patterns of conflict or misunderstanding between other parties, offer clarifying comments, summarize activities or give evaluative feedback. In some groups, these responsibilities are shared by many or all of the members. Other groups, whose members are less skillful at group process, will expect the facilitator to perform this function alone.

Code of Responsibilities: Ethics for Facilitators

There are a number of ways that the role of facilitator can get out of hand or be used unfairly. Often this happens without either the group or the facilitator realizing it. We feel that it is your responsibility to prevent abuse of your position as facilitator. Maintaining your integrity is significantly easier if you have thought through the following code of responsibilities and perhaps discussed them with other facilitators.

It is not enough that you yourself have the values of cooperation and egalitarianism. Most people are accustomed to participating in groups where one person acts as leader and where that one person is treated as someone important, someone with special power and wisdom. Unless the group understands your role, they will probably perceive you as an authority and allow you to influence them unduly. It is important for you to come down off your "pedestal" and let the group see you as "human." This is called *demystifying* your role as facilitator. Specific techniques for doing this will be described in Chapter Three [of *A Manual for Facilitators*].

Even though you conscientiously demystify your position, however, you may find that people depend on you. They may

concede some of their power as participants to you and look to you to make decisions, define a situation, etc. **This is probably the strongest test of your own values – whether you accept and use this power, or whether you reflect back to the group their need to take responsibility** for decisions and definitions. The temptation to use the power delegated to you to fill your own needs (increased self-esteem, manipulation of a situation for your own benefit, even simple expedience) will be strong. The fact that the group delegated the power to you is no excuse.

A similar potential for abuse rises out of the fact that the facilitator performs a subtle, non-directive role. The passive, friendly, well-meaning facilitator can be manipulative in ways that an aggressive, forceful leader could never get away with. The difference between a charming manipulator and a domineering dictator may only be a matter of whether or not the group is conscious that they are being controlled by their leader. **It is your responsibility not to use facilitation techniques to control a group.** This is especially true for group participants, not in any open leadership role, who are using these techniques during a meeting.

There are no external standards by which facilitators are rated. Anyone can call him- or herself a "facilitator," and this does not necessarily reflect on a person's experience, skills, or understanding of group process. Unfortunately, there are some people who call themselves facilitators, charge groups high fees, and leave them with nothing of lasting value. We hope that the readers of this manual will **use the information we present to become more effective in helping groups work well and in sharing skills with others, not for personal profit.**

Being a facilitator does not mean that you are qualified to be a psychotherapist, *either with a group of people or in a one-to-one situation.* Because of the stress on human values and feelings that facilitation involves, facilitators are often seen as resources for personal psychological problems as well as for organizational problems. So participants sometimes reach out to facilitators, either directly or indirectly, with their emotional needs. This reaching out can be interpreted as a statement on the lack of resources available for people's problems rather than as a comment on your skills as a therapist. Please be careful.

Also, please remember that ***you, as facilitator, cannot expect that you will meet your own emotional needs working with groups.*** If you are using a facilitation situation to satisfy some personal desire (need for attention, respect, power, making friends, finding lovers) you cannot be doing a good job of meeting the group's needs. Often in groups people develop one-sided perceptions of each other, resulting in intense interactions. If you, as facilitator, become particularly involved with one participant (or a small group of participants) you may neglect others, may be seen as an advocate of the one(s) you are involved with. This can be detrimental to the whole group. If you discover a particular attraction, follow it up on your own time.

Finally, ***it is the facilitator's responsibility to be sure the group understands what you are doing with them:*** what your goals are, how you expect to meet their needs, what you can give them, and how you are going to do it. It is your responsibility to represent yourself fairly, to be open to criticism from the group (you are there for *their* benefit), and to consider altering your own goals to meet the group's goals. **It is the group's right to hold you accountable** for what you do with them.

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Consensus is Primary to Group Facilitation

Freeman Marvin

The role of consensus decision making in facilitated groups has recently emerged as a controversial issue within the IAF. Participants in the Ethics and Values Think Tank (EVTT) worked together for the past year to draft a set of core principles to help guide the ethical behavior of IAF members in their practice of group facilitation—a Statement of Values and Code of Ethics for Group Facilitators.

EVTT participants found it relatively easy to agree that group facilitators should strive to maintain confidentiality, continuously improve their competence, show respect for the group, and avoid conflicts of interest. Other issues evoked some debate: whether or not a facilitator can or should remain content-neutral, guarantee a safe environment for the group, serve both the client and the group members, or ensure the participation of all relevant stakeholders. The EVTT drafted tentative positions on these issues.

One issue was unexpectedly controversial and remains unresolved—is the decision- making method used in facilitated groups an ethical concern? In particular, should decision making by group consensus be an ethical principle for group facilitators?

Some facilitators see consensus as one of a number of techniques that a facilitator and group members can use to make decisions. For them, consensus building is simply a group process that facilitators may use during the convergent stage of a meeting. However, groups determine for themselves how and when to reach decisions.

Other facilitators see the practical benefits of reaching decisions by consensus, so they prescribe it to their groups. They believe that consensus decision making leads to better implementation and to higher performing groups. But they don't consider consensus an ethical issue.

I see consensus as both a practical group process and as the only ethically sound decision-making technique that facilitated groups should adopt. I believe that consensus decision making is a core value for facilitators and that building consensus is a requirement for ethical group facilitation. Here's why.

1. Our leading practitioners have learned that consensus decision making is at the heart of facilitation.

From my bookshelf, I recently selected a dictionary and three of my favorite books by practicing facilitators to see what they had to say about consensus. First, my dictionary defines consensus as "An opinion or position reached by a group as a whole; agreement; accord; consent." This implies that consensus means *unanimous agreement*.

Ingrid Bens, in *Facilitating with Ease!*, says, "Consensus generates a decision about which everyone says, 'I can live with it.'"(Bens 1997, 116) Many facilitators use this more flexible definition—everyone in the group either agrees with the decision or can accept and support it. This practical definition of consensus makes a distinction between "agree-ability" and "acceptability."

Ingrid Bens goes on to say, "At its core, facilitating is a consensual activity." And, "Consensus is the best way to get participation and 'buy-in' to the generated solutions."

Still, she identifies six decision-making options for groups (in reverse order of their relative value): unanimous, one person decides, compromise, multi-voting, majority voting, and consensus. She argues "that each option has its place" and that the group (with the facilitator's help) should "choose the most appropriate method before each decision-making session." However, "There are many situations where the decisions being made are of such magnitude that consensus needs to be designated as the only acceptable method of decision making" (Bens 1997, 115-116).

Allen Moore and Jim Feldt, co-authors of *Facilitating Community and Decision Making Groups*, write, "Facilitators

are managers of group discussion and creativity, working toward a level of agreement or acceptance of alternatives for problem solving and decision making. Agreement is reached through discussion of issues, needs, barriers, and possible solutions." (Moore and Feldt 1993, 76)

And then, "The facilitator…tries to get a sense of support for options by using some technique to quickly see where interests converge. Voting or win-lose techniques are held off as last resort processes. Small and large group discussions about alternatives, options, and new ideas are used to get more participation and eventually ownership of priorities and potential solutions which the group will implement. These are some of the strategies that facilitators use to achieve consensus, not unanimous but general agreement, to support an idea, option, or solution." Finally, they state that, "Accommodating different points of view while working toward a solution, which the group can really get behind and support, is one of the primary goals of facilitated problem solving" (Moore and Feldt 1993, 82).

Like Ingrid Bens, they do not exclude other decision-making options, but for several practical reasons regard consensus as the method of choice.

Roger Schwarz, author of *The Skilled Facilitator*, is one of our best known "theory-based" facilitators practicing today. Roger Schwarz says "consensus is at the heart" of the ground rules for a facilitated group.

> "Consensus means that everyone in the group freely agrees with the decision and will support it. Even if one person cannot agree with a proposed decision, the group does not have a consensus."
>
> "Consensus ensures that each member's choices will be free choices and that each will be internally committed to the choices. Consensus decision making equalizes the distribution of power in the group, because every member's concerns must be addressed and every member's support is required to reach a decision." His assessment seems to be that consensus is more than just an effective group technique—it is required to stay consistent with the axiomatic value of "free and informed choice" by a group.

He goes on to say that "Voting is inconsistent with consensus decision making, but the group can take straw polls to see whether it is close to consensus and to see which members still have concerns about the proposal" (Schwarz 1994, 83-84).

Clearly, the experience of these practitioners is that reaching decisions by consensus is one of the best, if not the best, decision-making techniques for facilitated groups because of its many practical benefits. Moreover, it follows directly and flows from a coherent set of axioms of group facilitation. But is it the ethical way to make group decisions?

2. Consensus is an ethical principle for facilitators because other group decision-making methods violate the "pact of participation" that facilitators make with group members.

I divide groups into two broad types: cooperative groups and non-cooperative groups. Either of these types of groups can use collaborative or non-collaborative group processes. But we can really only facilitate cooperative groups using collaborative processes.

Members of **non-cooperative groups**, such as traditional labor-management boards, have mutually exclusive objectives. The goal in a non-cooperative group is to achieve an outcome in which the *individual* interests of the members are maximized.

Non-cooperative groups typically use non-collaborative processes such as negotiation, arbitration, and mediation—not facilitation. Decisions are best reached by compromise. "I'll give you this if you give me that." Ingrid Bens characterizes compromise as "no one feels they got what they originally wanted, so the emotional reaction is often, 'It's not really what I wanted but I'm going to have to live with it.'" Everyone accepts, but no one agrees.

Do some facilitators work with non-cooperative groups? Yes, but I don't believe they are *facilitating* the group when they do. They are performing the role of negotiator, arbitrator, or mediator. And if they follow ethical negotiation practices, compromise is an ethical decision-making method.

Members of **cooperative groups**, such as work teams, share some common objectives. The goal in a cooperative group is to achieve outcomes that maximize the *collective* interests of the members.

Many cooperative groups use non-collaborative processes—examples are governmental bodies such as legislatures, committees, and juries. Legislatures, committees, and juries don't use facilitators. Juries make decisions by unanimity—everyone must be in agreement. Legislatures and committees use voting to make decisions. Most members must agree, whether or not others disagree.

Still other cooperative groups, such as military staffs or executive councils, may use collaborative processes during discussions, but explicitly support decision making by a single individual, such as a commander or chief executive.

Do some facilitators work with these kinds of groups? Yes, but again, I don't believe they are *facilitating* the group. They are performing the roles of chairman, moderator, or rapporteur.

Voting, vetoes, and "one person decides" are practical and ethical decision-making methods in groups that are not facilitated.

Facilitation is effective for cooperative groups using collaborative processes. Throughout a facilitated, collaborative process, the facilitator is the catalyst for creating a climate of participation. If the facilitator is successful, group members are induced to enter into an implicit or explicit "pact of participation" with each other. They mutually agree to "buy in" to free and open collaboration in return for equal sharing of rewards and responsibilities of the group outcomes.

Because cooperative, collaborative groups enter into a pact of participation based wholly or partially on the presence of the facilitator, it is unethical for him or her to propose a non-consensual decision-making method in the convergent phase of the group process. After a facilitator has assisted in creating free and open participation by all group members, there is no ethical way to allow a violation of the pact and let some members of the group make a non-consensual decision. The facilitator cannot, like Anne Robinson on the TV show *The Weakest Link*, just say to someone in the minority, "Thank you for your views, but you ARE the weakest link! Good-bye!"

This ethical problem means that facilitated groups should not decide what decision-making methods they will use. In addition to the obvious problem of having no way to "decide how to decide", much valuable time can be spent distracted from the group's real work. The facilitator is the person who has been given the authority by the group to guide it through an effective group process. It is the facilitator, then, who decides whether the group is prepared to collaborate, and if so, helps the group to reach consensus.

I acknowledge that building and reaching consensus can be hard work for both the facilitator and the group members. Ingrid Bens says that the drawbacks of consensus building are that it "takes time, data, and member skills" (Bens 1997, 115). Too bad!

I believe that consensus is at the core, at the heart, and is primary to our profession of facilitation. It is more than a technique. It is more than a best practice. It is part of who we are when we facilitate. A facilitated group process without consensus is like inhaling without exhaling.

Should we include a principle on consensus in the IAF Statement of Values and Code of Ethics? As the wise Sioux chief says in the movie, *Dances with Wolves*, when the opinion of his tribal council is divided, "It is hard to know what to do. Perhaps we should think about it some more." Consensus, anyone?

Consensus Depends on the Situation

John Butcher

Parents of the students of a large public school are meeting on whether to recommend to the school board that uniforms be mandatory. A mixed business-labour-government group is trying to identify approaches to manage a multi-billion dollar injured worker insurance program. A Cabinet is assessing whether evidence of global warming is sufficiently clear to require further government restrictions on vehicle emissions. The members of a small religious congregation are selecting local community projects to receive its donations next year. A large, geographically- and culturally-diffuse professional association is devising a code of ethics and values to guide its members' behaviour.

Each group needs to make a decision. But how will it know when it has? When "50% + 1" vote in favour? When there is "general agreement"? When everyone can "live with" a particular decision? When there is "complete support" by each person in the group?

The typical facilitator response is to assist the group to establish its own standard for its decisions, based on whatever criteria the group feels are appropriate to the circumstances. Most facilitators and many authors (e.g., Bens 2000; Kaner et al 1996; Reddy 1994; Rees 1991) take this "situational" approach. Norms and "ground rules" are generated from within the group (not set by the facilitator). While the facilitator may advise the group on the implications of different decision-making models, in the end the group picks the one it feels is most appropriate to its short- and long-term needs. The facilitator must still ensure that the group is absolutely clear about what it means by whatever model it chooses ("So how would we know a decision that we could all

live with if it walked in the door?"), but otherwise leaves the model up to the group.

Such a "situational" approach is consistent with the most common tenets of facilitation that:

- eschew single models
- work to ensure the highest-possible group ownership both of outcomes and of the processes used to achieve those outcomes
- respect different organizational and group cultures and vocabularies
- support an atmosphere in which all participants feel free to express their views on the issue at hand
- ensure that the group is always clear in what it says and means
- maintain the facilitator's role of supporting the group's thinking, rather than becoming an advocate for a particular line of thought.

However, some facilitators and authors argue that *consensus* is typically the most appropriate – and always the most desirable – approach to decision making. Roger Schwarz expresses this view succinctly in *The Skilled Facilitator* (1994, 24):

> The core value of internal commitment implies that groups are more effective when they make decisions by consensus (unanimous agreement).

He later elaborates on this idea (Schwartz 1994, 83-84):

> Consensus means that everyone in the group freely agrees with the decision and will support it. If even one person cannot agree with a proposed decision, the group does not have a consensus. Consensus ensures that each member's choices will be free choices and that each will be internally committed to the choices.

As a skilled facilitator himself, Schwarz recognizes that there are situations in which consensus is not necessary. However, he prefers consensus because he feels it increases the quality of and commitment to the group's outcomes, enhances members' ability to work together, and more fully satisfies each group member's interests. This is not to say that consensus decision making guarantees that everyone is absolutely happy with the group's decision, but that all members will support it. It is more than "grudging acceptance," but may be less than "euphoric embrace." Consensus is preferred on the solid, practical grounds of group performance and member commitment. Facilitators are therefore encouraged to ensure that groups seriously consider consensus as their decision-making model – even to the extent of making it a "ground rule" (i.e., an approach the group always assumes to be in place and uses automatically, unless it explicitly decides to change it).

In the best of circumstances, consensus certainly feels like the best approach. This is especially true when it is rooted in the argument that effective implementation of a decision depends on buy-in both to the decision itself and to the process used to reach that decision. Good *content* might otherwise be rejected because of faulty *process*.

However, in the daily realities of group work, the consensus model may not be able to deliver all of its potential benefits. And the "consensus as ground rule" approach can, in fact, undermine what it is meant to achieve.

One concern with approaches other than consensus focuses on the "tyranny of the majority." Dissenters can be bullied into publicly agreeing with a decision they do not and will not support. It is assumed that the consensus approach, combined with standard facilitator interventions, can protect dissenters and help the group find an "integrative decision" (Schwarz 1994, 168) that is more likely to be effectively implemented.

Unfortunately, in practice, the facilitator cannot guarantee with certainty the protection of dissenters, whatever the decision rule. The facilitator leaves, the dissenter stays. "C'mon Bill, we have to get going: everyone else is on our side" is a powerful message, regardless of how it is delivered. If the dissenter acquiesces, the facilitator has little option but to accept the agreement at face value. The facilitator who tries to prolong the discussion risks entering content, making life even more difficult for the dissenter, and appearing to oppose a group that is ready to move on.

Nor, in practice, is implementation necessarily jeopardized by lack of consensus. Many reluctant conscripts have fought bravely. Many unhappy organizational people are nonetheless "good soldiers." People don't necessarily have to "whistle while they work" to be effective.

The consensus approach also opens the possibility of the "dictatorship of dissent." If there must be "unanimous agreement" to move forward, then any one member of the group has a veto. Even if the group has agreed in advance that explanations must be provided to back up dissent, who judges the validity of those explanations – the group, the dissenter, the facilitator? Even if the explanations are not persuasive to the rest of the group's members, the group cannot move forward. The "consensus as unanimity" approach must accept the validity of the veto, or fail to respect one of its own tenets – that the group does not proceed unless everyone agrees.

A facilitator may struggle to convince a group to include an individual whose views are not welcome, but which are critical if the group is to achieve the best possible outcomes. If the ground rule is always consensus ("unanimous agreement"), then a group may well resist inclusion of people it sees as troublesome or holding divergent views, regardless of how useful they might be. The risk in setting "consensus as a ground rule" thus becomes, ironically, more "groupthink" as groups recruit like-minded participants rather than court deadlock (Janis 1982). Skilled facilitators can certainly help groups think through their divergence, but not all groups know or believe this. Besides, there are no guarantees.

As well, even groups that insist on consensus and use broad participation, can still enter "in-think." All that effort expended to reach consensus can make a group resistant to any change. Participants bond to their decision and reject alternative outside perspectives that may emerge, or go into denial if the decision turns out to be one that cannot be well implemented. Effective organizations often encourage healthy dissent and are alarmed when everyone seems to be in agreement. They see dissenters as valuable resources and reality checks, and encourage constant questioning and skepticism (Horibe 2001).

Finally, the ultimate question around consensus must be: "What does it take to decide whether unanimity will be the decision-making model? Can a majority decide that it has to be unanimous?" This is not a frivolous concern. Most groups would, for all of the reasons Schwarz and others advance, prefer to use consensus, especially for very important decisions. But many groups fear that this ground rule may deadlock them at some point in their deliberations. Once consensus has been agreed to as the decision-making standard, it surely requires unanimous agreement to change it. Fearing the dictatorship of dissent, or simply an inability to move forward despite an overwhelming (but not unanimous) desire to do so, many groups choose to avoid explicitly adopting the consensus model, preferring a more situational approach that may or may not include consensus.

So, instead of promoting consensus as a ground rule at the beginning of a group's deliberations, the prudent facilitator may prefer to let the group do some thinking and see how much "general agreement" emerges. Then the discussion can be held around how much agreement is required to ensure buy-in and effective implementation. At that point, if there is still divergence, the group may decide to keep working to achieve unanimity. Or it may "agree to disagree," and let the decision go forward when a significant majority of participants supports it and wishes to see it implemented. Legitimate time and resource pressures may also be present. In many cases, it is much more appropriate and effective in the short and long terms to respect both the dissenters and the significant majority by accepting that differences exist and by recognizing the group's right and ability to decide whether to move forward.

Consensus may be desirable, but it is certainly not essential for a group to make durable decisions that can be fully implemented. Making consensus a ground rule for group decisions is unnecessary and may inhibit a group from doing good work. It may create "false closure" by pressuring participants to publicly agree when it may be equally effective if a dissenter can say, "I expressed my concerns and they heard me, but the general view was to move forward. Because I respected the significant majority of the group in its wishes, I can still have influence as this decision is implemented."

They may be bromides or truisms, but "The perfect is often the enemy of the good" and "Half a loaf is better than none." Facilitators are always wise to keep these in mind when they are thinking about encouraging a group to use "consensus" to the exclusion of "general agreement" or "something we can all live with." They should also remember that groups and organizations are dynamic, changing organisms as their members evolve in their own thinking and experience. Groups and organizations do learn. They can revisit decisions and change how they do things next time.

In over 12 years as a self-employed facilitator working primarily with multi-stakeholder groups (usually including business and labour), I have never worked with a group that decided it required "unanimous agreement" for its decisions, or that even discussed such a proposition at any length. What I have found is that group members insist on the opportunity to persuade others to their points of view, but not on the right to veto what the group might decide. Part of my role as facilitator is to ensure that the opportunity to persuade is respected, that the group is absolutely clear on the ground rules it does wish to use, that the group itself owns any agreement it reaches, and that the group fully explores how it will implement its agreement (including overcoming potential barriers).

The group that chooses consensus (especially as a ground rule) accepts both benefits and risks. It may find that its decisions are more durable (if sometimes harder to reach). But it may also expose itself to unnecessary obstruction, delay, "groupthink," and the choking off of the ongoing benefits of dissent, while jeopardizing its very ability to reach some form of agreement and move forward. Consensus is indeed double-edged. In the end, it is one of several equally effective situational approaches to decision making – all of which can, in their place, help a group to produce high quality and durable results.

Comments on John Butcher's essay, "Consensus Depends on the Situation"

Freeman Marvin

John Butcher makes an argument that the "situational approach" to facilitation is most commonly accepted among facilitators and, therefore, precludes the need for an ethical guideline on group decision making. Under his situational approach, facilitated groups decide how to decide for themselves. Decision making by consensus is one of several equally effective methods a group may choose, depending on the situation. I am not convinced.

First, there are several terms that seem to divide us. When John uses the word "consensus," he takes it to mean strict "unanimous agreement." This is the definition also used by Roger Schwarz in *The Skilled Facilitator* (I think he may have softened a bit in his recent writing). But unanimity is only an extreme case of consensus, whereby everyone is in "agreement." Consensus can also be achieved on the other extreme with everyone merely in "acceptance." John seems more comfortable with consensus decision making if it is defined as "something we can all live with."

Also, I think most of us would offer different explanations of the differences between facilitators, negotiators, mediators and arbitrators. John's work has been primarily with multi-stakeholder groups (such as business and labor) and he defines his work as group facilitation. I would agree that consensus is probably not the ethical way to make decisions in a labor-management negotiation, where some participants lose something if other participants gain. There, compromise decision making is completely ethical. In those types of groups, I wonder if "facilitator" is sometimes used as a euphemism for the more hard-edged term *mediator*?

Under John's situational approach, he advocates that group members decide for themselves what decision-making process to use, with the advice of the facilitator. I generally do not favor letting groups tell me how to do my job, since I scrupulously avoid telling them how to do theirs. But I believe that most cooperative, collaborative groups would choose consensus if given the choice. It gets more complicated for other types of groups. Do we have a validated reference that tells us, as group facilitators, what decision-making method to advise groups to use in different situations? If not, our guidance is likely to be unreliable. Here is where I get queasy about the ethics of intervening as a facilitator in various types of competitive groups. I do not think we have the same methods, tools, and competencies as professional mediators and negotiators. Brain surgeons probably do not make the best plumbers.

It seems unlikely that John would ever advise a group to use consensus anyway because he believes that:

- dissenters are not protected by consensus any more than by majority rule
- good implementation of decisions does not require consensus
- dissenters can simply veto the decision of the rest of the group
- groups using consensus tend to resist including members with divergent viewpoints
- groups using consensus tend to reject outside perspectives or live in denial
- groups that would prefer to use consensus may fear becoming deadlocked over process issues.

But I agree with John when he says that it is a good outcome when a dissenter can say, "I expressed my concerns and they heard me..." and I ACCEPT now that it is better to move forward as a group. That is consensus building! Consensus is not reached so long as one member says that he or she cannot accept the decision until it addresses his or her concerns. That is the pact of participation we must honor.

Finally, although John says that he has never worked with a group that used consensus (defined as unanimous agreement), I would be interested to know what decision-making processes his groups have selected to reach agreements – is it show-of-hands voting with majority rule? Secret ballot? One person decides?

John believes that consensus decision making is one of several equally effective situational approaches to decision making. I

must disagree. Consensus is more effective, although I wish we had better empirical data to show it. And even if he were right, there are many equally effective ways to do a lot of things, but are they all equally ethical?

I think we, as IAF, have several steps to take. We need to develop terms of reference with definitions of key facilitation concepts such as consensus. This will help our clients, our group members and, most importantly, us to create a shared understanding of what facilitation is and how it works. We should also sponsor and encourage more empirical research on group convergence and the effectiveness of collaborative decision-making techniques. We also need to continue these deep discussions of the core issues that define our profession.

Comments on Freeman Marvin's essay, "Consensus is Primary to Group Facilitation"

John Butcher

Freeman Marvin's brief and passionate essay sets itself an ambitious task: to show not only that the decision-making method used in groups is an ethical concern, but also that consensus ("unanimous agreement") is "**the only** [*emphasis added*] ethically sound decision making technique" for *facilitated* groups.

Freeman tries to make his task a little easier by defining *facilitation* very narrowly: what facilitators do with "cooperative" groups that are using "collaborative" processes. But this description of facilitation is far too narrow to be useful in practice. Often a facilitator is asked to facilitate a group precisely *because* it is struggling to become cooperative and collaborative. In such circumstances, a facilitated group may well use non-consensus decision-making approaches, either because certain decisions are not of the magnitude to require consensus, or because the group is not emotionally ready to set consensus as a ground rule. In either case, the decision-making approach is rarely an ethical concern *per se*, but simply a pragmatic response to the realities of a group's stage of development at a certain time.

Even though I see decision making primarily as a pragmatic issue, I am nonetheless drawn to Freeman's notion of a "pact of participation" that group members enter. From this pact comes, in Freeman's mind, the ethical imperative to use consensus as *the* decision-making approach. However, in my experience, the "pact of participation" is not, as Freeman suggests, some bargain to share rewards and responsibilities around the group's outcomes. Rather, it is the explicit acceptance that group members will have a full and free opportunity to persuade others to their points of view. The pact is one of respect and openness to the exchange of ideas and perspectives, not a guarantee that the outcomes will have unanimous agreement. In other words, the "pact of participation" brings with it no ethical obligation to use only consensus.

It is not "consensus decision making [that] is at the heart of facilitation," as Freeman states, but the creation of an atmosphere that will permit true dialogue among the group's members, and growth in the group's capacity to manage its thinking and its internal relationships. This uncouples "free and open participation by all group members" from the decision-making approach the group might choose to adopt – a coupling that Freeman explicitly assumes.

But, so strongly does Freeman believe that the decision-making method employed by a group is an ethical issue, that he would remove this responsibility from the facilitated group altogether and vest it, presumably, with the facilitator. Thus consensus becomes not a choice for the group to make, but a dictum to which it must adhere.

Because this so clearly violates the sense of ownership that a group must feel for all aspects of its work, even Freeman comes to doubt the very task the essay sets out to achieve. How else can we interpret his closing remark that we need to think more before incorporating consensus as a principle in the IAF Statement of Values and Code of Ethics? If consensus is positioned as an *ethical* absolute, then no statement and code could be adopted by IAF without its members' unanimous agreement. And if consensus is so positioned, then unanimous agreement will never be achieved. Does this mean that the statement and code should be silent on decision-making

approaches? No, but we can more usefully position all forms of decision making as products of the *group's* needs and desires, not as imposed ethical absolutes.

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Three Volumes for the Writer's Library

Book Reviews by Julianna Gustafson

As a facilitator, you may write for varying purposes and audiences: a consulting proposal to engage a new client, or perhaps a journal article or book to contribute to ongoing scholarly or professional discourse. Regardless of your level of experience, writing can be a laborious—even dreaded—task. How many of us can relate to that feeling of panic when confronted with a blank computer screen and a looming deadline? (How do I capture my reader's attention? Is this sentence hard to read? My thoughts are brilliant, so why is my writing so banal? What are my chances of getting this piece published?) To surmount this impasse, you need a little elbow grease, a lot of what Anne Lamott calls a writer's "revolutionary patience," and maybe some advice from the experts. No book can solve all your problems for you, but there are a few good ones that can help you face the task of writing with confidence and vigor.

My favorites comprise a trio of complementary books: William Zinsser's On Writing Well *(the process of writing nonfiction), Elizabeth Rankin's* The Work of Writing *(specifically for professional and academic contexts), and Joseph William's* Style *(a guide about the craft of writing, regardless of context). While all three are valuable resources in a writer's library, the kind of book you need depends upon the kinds of problems or pitfalls you tend to encounter when you write.*

On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction

by William Zinsser

(New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1998), 6th Edition, 308 pages, ISBN: 0-0627-3523-3.

On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction is a broadly sweeping guide for writers in any nonfiction genre: from science to sports, travel to technology, memoir to management. The author, William Zinsser, spent 13 years as a writer and editor for the New York *Herald Tribune* and developed this book out of a nonfiction writing course he taught at Yale in the 70s.

If you expect books about writing to be boring, condescending, or riddled with obscure grammatical rules, you'll be pleasantly surprised by this one. Zinsser writes with refreshing simplicity, humor, and encouraging candor. He's not one of these writers who pretends that the words just flow; he readily admits to procrastination, paralysis, and even perspiring over challenging projects. "Writing is hard work…Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it *is* hard." (12). This author is on *your* side.

This classic reference encompasses the entire process of writing. Chapters address a spectrum of central issues: principles, methods, forms, and attitudes. The sections on principles and methods include the usual suspects—conceiving a compelling opening paragraph, focusing on the audience, achieving unity of voice, choosing words carefully, ending with a punch, and (everyone's favorite) revising. His chapters on forms offer guidelines for writing in specific fields—business, science, sports, humor, the arts. The final chapters on attitude discuss psychological aspects of writing: embracing the sound of your authentic voice; enjoyment, fear, and confidence; how an infatuation with the idea of a finished product can impede your progress; a writer's decisions; and finally, an exhortation to write the highest quality work you can. The chapter on a writer's decisions offers a glimpse into Zinsser's critical thought process for his own writing: he parcels out paragraphs of an article he wrote for a travel magazine, annotated with blow-by-blow commentary about the editorial choices he made as he wrote.

The style he preaches is direct and simple, free of clutter, the product of ruthless pruning and self-restraint. Interspersed with the author's insights and anecdotes are plentiful samples of writing both strong and weak, varying in style and genre, to illustrate the principles discussed in a given section. In addition to numerous excerpts of his own work, he shares selections from

highly regarded writers like Joan Didion, E.B. White, Joseph Mitchell, John Updike, and Cynthia Ozick.

My one quibble with the book is this: I do not agree with Zinsser's advice on dealing with gendered pronouns (he favors masculine pronouns when there is no graceful way to avoid choosing a gender—somehow using an occasional "she" fails to occur to him) and he sporadically refers to collective humanity as "man." However, beyond that, I find his advice flawless and his writing an excellent model of the principles he espouses.

The Work of Writing: Insights and Strategies for Academics and Professionals

by Elizabeth Rankin

(San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 122 pages, ISBN: 0-7879-5679-1.

As its title suggests, *The Work of Writing: Insights and Strategies for Academics and Professionals* speaks specifically to those writing in professional or academic contexts. Author Elizabeth Rankin is an English professor and director of a faculty development program at the University of North Dakota, where she also leads writing seminars and workshops.

Focusing on the human side of the process rather than on rhetorical considerations, the book is organized around four themes central to professional and academic writing: 1) contributing to the professional conversation; 2) meeting readers' needs and expectations; 3) finding your professional voice; and 4) seeing the project through. Rankin explores how writing evolves from draft to draft and how writers respond to suggestions, and she offer solutions for overcoming internal obstacles to writing.

This lively and engaging guide is peppered with real-life stories gleaned from the author's writing groups. The multiple scenarios in each chapter reflect diverse writing projects—grant proposals, curricula, journal articles, book chapters—in a variety of fields, from the hard sciences to the humanities. Although many examples are weighted toward academic writing, the principles Rankin expounds are solid and apply equally well to professional writing. The book is particularly appropriate for anyone involved with a writing group, but it offers great advice for the solo-flyer, too. The scenarios illustrate important principles of successful writing and are followed by repeated sections called "Getting Feedback from Others" and "Writing on Your Own."

One of Rankin's most valuable chapters is Chapter 4: Finding Your Professional Voice, where she encourages the reader to find an authentic professional voice and discard any preconceived notions of what the professional voice ought to be in a given field. A highlight of this chapter is her discussion about "exorcising the graduate student"—the "cautious, risk-averse, dissertation stance that…helps explain the overuse of citations and qualifiers, as well as the frequent 'calls for research'" (61-62). I haven't seen another book address this issue, even though this type of writing runs rampant in professional and academic contexts. Many highly respected professionals (even 20 years into their careers) still write like this, and as an editor, I see this in about 75% of the manuscripts that cross my desk.

Another noteworthy contribution is her practical advice for collaborative writers. Given that collaborations are the norm in professional and scholarly writing endeavors—co-authors team up to write articles, chapters, or books—it is surprising that more books don't address this aspect of a writer's challenge. (What do you do when your and your co-author's visions diverge? When your styles are different? When you disagree about the content or audience? What if one of you loses faith in the project?)

Appendices at the back of the book include a guide for starting a writing group, sample book proposal guidelines, and a list of recommended books on writing.

Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace

by Joseph Williams

(New York, NY: Addison Wesley Longman, 2000), 6th Edition, 308 pages, ISBN: 0-3210-2408-7.

It's possible to have mastered the rules of grammar and still lack clarity or write awkwardly. Your readers recognize it, but what exactly is it *about* your writing that makes it so? How can you learn to identify and fix this problem?

A personal style tutor is just what you'll find in *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, by Joseph Williams, professor emeritus in the departments of English and Linguistics at the University of Chicago. This book beautifully illustrates the distinction between writing *correctly* and writing *clearly*, and demonstrates how to move beyond mere correctness to the higher states of Clarity and Grace.

The book provides abundant examples of unclear, wordy, yet *perfectly correct* writing in each chapter, starting with a very funny short history of unclear writing from 1582 to the present, and continuing through a final chapter on the ethics of prose. The central chapters deal with style: correctness, the notion of clarity in "actions" and "characters" (a robust reinterpretation of the old noun-verb concept), cohesion and coherence, emphasis, concision, shape, and elegance. Through detailed examples and thorough discussions of revised sentences and paragraphs, Williams holds a mirror to your own writing and offers concrete steps to help you learn to see your own writing as others do.

Williams bases his advice on the Writer's Golden Rule: write to others as you would have them write to you. His point is that while following the rules contributes to good writing, obsessing over the finer points of grammatical perfection is silly. We can become so mired in those details that we lose sight of the task at hand: clear, graceful and precise thought and expression. Rules are there to help you, but once you know what they are, you can break and bend them with felicitous results. Examples illustrate when you can—and should—use passive sentence construction, start sentences with "but," end with a preposition, and employ numerous other taboos your high school English teacher forbade.

Style is a dense and focused little volume. Don't let the crowded pages seem off-putting: each chapter is packed with boxed chapter highlights, numerous pairings of an unclear sentence with its new-and-improved graceful counterpart, and exercise after exercise to give you practical experience in recognizing and revising clunky writing. In addition to exercises, the book furnishes lists of common errors educated readers are likely to catch (and judge you for), and the back of the book contains solutions for selected revision exercises, as well as a glossary of grammatical terms and an appendix on punctuation.

Follow Williams's advice and you will avoid "a kind of prose written by those who confuse authority and objectivity with polysyllabic abstraction and remote impersonality" (79).

Julianna Gustafson is an acquisitions editor in the business & management series at Jossey-Bass Publishers. She acquires books in the areas of facilitation, teams, project management, human resource management, and industrial/organizational psychology. Contact her at: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741; phone: 415-782-3196; fax: 415-433-1711; jgustafs@josseybass.com.

Group Facilitation: A Research & Applications Journal

Aim and Scope

Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal is a multi-disciplinary publication focused on the art and science of group facilitation. The aim of Group Facilitation is to advance our knowledge of group facilitation and its implications for individuals, groups, organizations, and communities. It is published semi-annually.

The ***Group Facilitation Journal*** is intended for facilitators, mediators, organizational development and training specialists, managers, researchers, and others who seek to use facilitation skills in their practice. Articles represent diverse perspectives, including organizational learning and development, group and system dynamics, collaborative technology, negotiation, mediation, leadership, decision-making, conflict resolution, cross-cultural contexts, and education. Possible topics include, but are not limited to, facilitator roles within the group, interventions for conflict management, descriptions of specific facilitation methods, approaches to facilitating specific tasks such as idea generation or priority setting, using computer technology to support facilitation, increasing participation in organizations, exploring the underlying values, beliefs and models of facilitation, and applying facilitation skills and concepts to various settings.

The journal is comprised of the following sections, which are described below in more detail: Application and Practice; Theory and Research; Edge Thinking; Book Reviews.

Application and Practice is devoted to articles that reflect on facilitator experience. Articles appropriate for this section include reports on experiences gained and lessons learned presented in a reflective case study, and discussion of facilitator roles, problems encountered by facilitators or their clients, and intervention methods and techniques. Studies should be both descriptive and evaluative and should draw on existing literature appropriately.

Theory and Research is devoted to articles that explore, propose, or test practices, principles, or other aspects of facilitation models. Such studies are typically based on survey, experimental, ethnographic, or other research methods.

Edge Thinking is intended to stimulate thinking on new concepts and issues. Contributions may be less formal than the other sections, and might include dialogues, essays, editorials, and proposals for new areas of inquiry.

Book Reviews presents critical and comparative reviews of recent and classic books related to group facilitation.

Submission Guidelines

Submission guidelines and other information about the journal may be obtained on the journal website www.iaf-world.org/Journal or from the Editor (see below).

Original manuscripts should be submitted via electronic mail (preferred) to:

Sandor P. Schuman, Editor
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518-442-5889

Paper submissions may be sent to:

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Group Facilitation: A Research & Applications Journal
Book Review Guidelines

Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal presents critical and comparative reviews of recent and classic books related to group facilitation. These guidelines include recommendations for writing and submitting a review, information about the review cycle and reviewer qualifications.

Writing the Review

When writing a review, please include:

- overall impression of the book
- the highlights and structure of the book
- for whom the book would be appropriate
- what you found particularly helpful, unclear, weak
- your personal learning, if any
- particular benefits to you in your facilitation, if any
- value of the book for facilitators, if any
- significant contribution of the book, if any, to the field of facilitation
- your recommendation of "must read" portions of the book, if any
- a summary or wrap-up of your reading experience.

In addition:

- provide definitions of terms, acronyms, references, and background summary statements where appropriate.
- where necessary, be sure to include complete citations and attributions.
- identify specific texts (usually a sentence or phrase) for possible use in pull quotes.
- publisher; ISBN designation; price ($US); where to purchase (i.e. all major bookstores or telephone number for direct ordering if the book is not widely available commercially).
- background about the book author: facilitation experience and/or other writings.

What we are looking for:

- people familiar with the conceptual and practical sides of facilitation and who are willing to spend the time required to write interesting and thought provoking reviews.
- reviews of books that address facilitation and related issues, such as consensus decision making, participatory problem solving and group decision-making.
- in-depth and critical reviews that help readers decide whether or not the books reviewed are ones that they should consider reading.
- comparative reviews of two or more books that differentiate, compare and contrast the books and thoroughly examine the strengths and weaknesses.
- reviews that place the book in the context of other literature.

Submitting a Review

Reviews are typically between 1,000 and 3,000 words. Submissions should be made electronically (via email or on IBM compatible diskette) in Microsoft Word, WordPerfect or Rich Text (RTF) format. If you are interested reviewing a book for the Journal, please contact:

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