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UNDERSTANDING PROCESS THROUGH EVERYDAY LIFE

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Abstract

Effective process facilitators need both “process” understanding and “facilitation” skills. News stories are an excellent vehicle to gain clearer perspectives on common group processes. Facilitators can use the news to draw on shared experiences that illustrate how people observe and apply process in everyday life. Facilitators are then better able to provide clear, quick and interesting briefings to groups to set up and reinforce the use of specific processes.

The Value-Added of Process

“Process Facilitation” is about supporting groups to think effectively about the issues they face. On the one hand, “processes” are the various thinking frameworks applicable to different tasks (decision-making, planning, problem-solving, etc.). On the other hand, “facilitation” regroups the meeting management skills that enable group members to focus together on the task at hand. Each set of knowledge and skills - both “process” and “facilitation” - is equally essential.



More often, however, our emphasis is on facilitation. Groups value the facilitator's ability to "keep them on track", to help them work together more smoothly, to address personality and extraneous issues that might jeopardize success. Often a meeting can benefit when basic facilitation skills are used simply to moderate the discussion.

But facilitation alone typically does not address a group's needs. Members require support in structuring their thinking, in disentangling complex issues, so they can move forward. This is the value-added of "process".

Understanding Process

Most groups find processes easy to use. Common processes typically reflect thinking approaches that people learn at an early age. Making a decision, sorting out why and how something went wrong, planning a task or project - these are all things that most adults can do. They are part of our basic "life skills".

What the process facilitator brings to a group is the ability to structure and use various processes in the most efficient and effective ways to help address the issue at hand. While both process facilitators and group members often intuitively understand the basic thinking approach reflected in a process, that is different from being able to explain, structure, and lead in the use of the process in a group setting. As a result, the process facilitator requires a deeper, more systematic understanding of the various common processes.

That understanding can often be gained by thinking about news events in terms of the processes they reflect. Let's link some common processes and news events to see how this approach to understanding process works.

Problem Analysis

The process definition of a “problem” is very specific: a negative deviation from what is normal, or desired. We do Problem Analysis when we need to separate “symptoms” from “causes”, so that we can take action to truly correct the problem and prevent its recurrence.

Problem Analysis is in the news almost every day. Coroners’ inquiries are problem analysis exercises. Investigations of riots, fires, mine explosions, diseases in the blood supply, subway collisions and other disasters use the same approach. After the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado (and later in Taber, Alberta), all of the subsequent discussion was framed as Problem Analysis: “How could those kids have done such a thing? Why didn’t we know it was coming? How can we prevent such tragedies from recurring?” The norm is safe schools. The deviation is killings. The root causes are?

Lots of other examples of Problem Analysis show up regularly. Are guns a root cause of crime or is their use merely symptomatic? Do welfare payments mitigate or cause poverty, teenage pregnancy, school leaving and other social problems? Why is attendance declining in mainstream religious denominations and rising in evangelical ones? Epidemiologists use Problem Analysis techniques to track down the sources of epidemics.

Decision Analysis

Once again, the process definition of a “decision” is quite specific: a choice made from among alternatives based on pre-determined criteria. No choice, no decision (just fate). No pre-determined criteria, no decision (just retroactive justification).

Inherent in Decision Analysis is the use of mandatory (“screen”) and non-mandatory (“comparison”) criteria. The former are used to eliminate inappropriate alternatives (“The sports car just won’t seat five kids”), the latter to assess the surviving alternatives so that we can make a



preliminary choice, before running it through risk assessment (“Purple and tangerine would be cute, but the neighbours would laugh”). We avoid using too many screen criteria, because failure to pass through any one of them will eliminate an alternative from further consideration.

Where do we see Decision Analysis in the news? The issue of the ordination of homosexuals in mainstream Protestant denominations has been fought out through Decision Analysis. Should homosexuality be a screen criterion that eliminates candidates for ordination from further consideration, no matter what other qualifications they bring? Or should homosexuality be simply a comparison criterion, one of several against which candidates are assessed within their overall lifestyles and “calling”. The United Church of Canada (this country’s largest Protestant denomination) has decided that sexual orientation is a comparison criterion, not a screen. This decision was a very painful one, and cost the United Church many congregations and members. It was made more complicated and emotional by the presence of so many competing values within the debate.

The different systems of financing medical care between Canada and the United States can be seen in terms of Decision Analysis. In the U.S., the screen criteria are set up around freedom of choice and respect for the free market system. Efficiency and cost are comparison criteria. In Canada, our screens are around equality and accessibility. Our system is cheaper and barriers to access are not primarily financial. Both systems position their criteria around their contrasting value systems, making the discussion of the merits of each approach much more heated, interesting and fundamental.

Worldwide trade liberalization highlights debates over screen and comparison criteria. Many opponents in Canada and the United States point to the potential for job loss, environmental degradation, erosion of social programs, loss of control over national decision-

making, wage slavery in developing countries and many other concerns. For opponents of trade liberalization, such concerns are screen criteria against which they assess any proposal.

Proponents, on the other hand, argue that freer access to markets will increase prosperity, encourage democracy, and raise general standards of living. Proponents claim to have the data to support their case. Opponents concentrate on anticipated risks, proponents on anticipated benefits. Each tries to use screen criteria.

In Canada, efforts to eliminate public sector debt and deficits have focused debate on the criteria we should use to decide resource allocations and expenditure reductions. For some, criteria that support economic expansion are key. These may lead to decisions to effect tax relief, public works (infrastructure) investments, reduced (or increased) business subsidies, etc. For others, maintaining the “social safety net” and long-term social investments are the overriding considerations. As a result, they put the priority on increased investments in health care and education, and oppose tax regimes that may threaten the public capacity to tackle major social concerns such as homelessness, child poverty and abuse, environmental degradation, etc. Such debates encompass individuals’ values and fundamental worldviews. Process can help us both to understand the debate more clearly and to contribute to its resolution (or at least its civility).

Action Planning

This is a process we all feel we’ve nailed down. Who hasn’t planned an “action”? In process terms, Action Planning is “the framework for accomplishing a task.” The purpose of Action Planning is to ensure successful completion of the task by anticipating and controlling the things that can go wrong. As a result, risk assessment, and the setting of actions to prevent those risks from arising, are central to Action Planning. This process is much more complicated (and useful) than simply running around doing things.



We can see Action Planning in relief flights into combat zones. Sarajevo was a good example. The task was to bring emergency supplies into the city. The risks revolved around planes getting shot down. The preventative action was to land quickly, at irregular intervals. If this preventative action failed, the contingent action was to cancel the flights. The trigger for the contingent action was mortar shells landing too close to the runway or a plane actually hit.

In “post-Communist” Eastern Europe, we can also see complex Action Planning unfold. One issue involves how to minimize the risks to ordinary citizens of reduced price regulation and other economic decisions. Another centres on managing traditional ethnic strife that more totalitarian regimes suppressed. A third tries to balance freedom and order - less intrusive states and mob rule. All this is going on as markets are actually opened, prices deregulated, political institutions changed, and borders moved. The process has been compared to changing the tires on a race car - while it is going 150 kilometres an hour.

South Africa must do similar Action Planning as it struggles through the implementation of majority rule. Both black and white political organizations are trying to neutralize their more radical members. How fast should the country go in democratizing its institutions? How can crime, revenge and political intransigence be prevented from rupturing the social and political fabric? What are the contingent actions in case things start to fall apart?

A particularly tragic example of Action Planning gone awry was the Challenger space shuttle explosion and the deaths of its astronauts. The malfunction that caused the explosion had been anticipated. One version of events is that the people with this information were reluctant to push it too hard with decision-makers who had other issues on their minds. Another version is that the probability that the malfunction would occur was low (although the seriousness if it did

occur was obviously high). The flight was launched. Regardless of the version, no preventative action was taken.

If It Was Only So Simple

News events rarely include only one process. All of the examples used above tie together several processes. The Problem Analysis at Columbine High School was followed by decisions on intervention programs and actions to implement those programs. Peacekeeping is a complex exercise to disentangle issues, determine criteria for intervention, anticipate problems, act to mitigate those problems and maintain a clear eye on the guiding criteria, regardless of the distractions once the intervention begins.

Perhaps the biggest “process” news story in recent years was “Y2K”. This simple, innocent-sounding term became a shorthand for everything from “your computer may lose your shopping list” to “you will die a horrible and agonizing death from the complete breakdown of all basic functions in our society”. Y2K has had all the ingredients of the full range of processes: a tangled group of issues (leavened by millenarian angst), an anticipated problem with clear root causes, decisions on where individuals, organizations and society should invest to preempt the problem, large-scale action to marshal the human, financial and technological resources to implement those decisions, and continuous monitoring to see whether unanticipated concerns were arising and whether the actions were really working.

As process facilitators, many of our insights on how best to use process and facilitation can come from the lessons in the day’s news. In reading, listening and watching for process, we can increase our understanding of the news, and do some valuable professional development at the same time.



The Presenter

John Butcher is President of Associates in Planning Inc., a process facilitation firm he established in Ottawa, Ontario in 1989. His clients include private, public, and not-for-profit organizations across Canada. Mr. Butcher's work covers both process facilitation interventions with client organizations, as well as workshops on planning and process facilitation skills. He has also published papers on change management and organizational planning. Mr. Butcher is a member of the International Association of Facilitators, Canadian Human Resource Planners, and the Couchiching Institute on Public Affairs.