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CRITICAL INCIDENTS: HOW DO VALUES AND PRINCIPLES GUIDE US?

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We face many questions as group facilitators. Which methods, techniques and procedures should we use? Are some "good" and others "bad;" are some "better" than others? When should we use them? How should we apply them? How and when should we respond as facilitators to the particular actions of group members? How can we help group members work together more effectively in the future? Are there situations where we should not be willing to perform the role of group facilitator?

We could address these questions by creating a long list that matches each type of situation with an appropriate response. However, if we examined our responses, and if we had responded consistently, we would find a single set of undergirding values and principles. Rather than focus only on the "long list" we might take some time to examine the values and principles that provide the basis for our actions in any situation. Then we could take a look at a specific situation -- a real situation from the past -- and see if the actions taken were consistent with those stated values and principles.

The purpose of this session is to examine those underlying values and principles and how they are manifested in our practice. The source material for this examination is presented in two



parts. Part I addresses values and principles per se as seen by some of the leading authors in our field. Part II presents a series of "critical incidents" -- real situations encountered by practicing facilitators -- that will allow us to examine the underlying values and principles and how they were applied in practice.

Rather than limit our discussion to the abstract values and principles, critical incidents will help us examine how and why facilitators might react differently to a given situation. We'd like to bring into focus the principles and values that guide our practice as a group facilitators by examining several critical incidents.

Part I: Values and Principles that Guide Us

This section presents some values and principles from the perspective of three authors and panelists for this session.

Ingrid Bens

We all know that facilitation is a helping role grounded in the conviction that two heads are better than one. We also know that facilitators bring much needed structure to meetings and group activities. Lately I've become aware of a further dimension to facilitation that I hadn't thought very much about in the past; namely that facilitation is about hope.

This may sound a bit melodramatic. It's not meant to be, because the hopefulness of our clients is real. It may be a small hope: that the meeting we're going to run will be a good use of their time. Or it may be a major hope: that employees will finally get to express ideas and concerns usually suppressed by an autocratic bureaucracy.

Since facilitation is based on valuing everyone's contribution equally, we're often the only avenue for bringing empowerment and democracy to workplaces firmly locked into an autocratic mode. We also bring hope by helping people set improvement goals and by providing a means of identifying and solving intractable problems.

In "Flawless Consulting", Peter Block points out that the main contribution of the consultant is in helping the client see their 'real' situation by providing a neutral perspective. This is also true of facilitators.

Our job is to create environments where people feel they can confront the 'truth' and to provide tools useful in seeking innovative solutions to serious problems. This means that we always need to remember that our client is everyone involved, not just the senior manager who hired us. It reminds us that we aren't there to help upper management get to the answer they already had going in, but to support them in making the really tough decisions that their customers and employees need them to make.

At the end of a recent change intervention a front-line workers stopped me on the plant floor to bemoan the end of the project. "Who's going to help us get our ideas out there once you're gone?" he asked. The look of concern on his face was a very real one. Not one of the

plant's many supervisors and managers had shown the slightest inclination to adopt a more facilitative style in spite of numerous successful problem solving workshops they had attended.

I told him that I was going to be running workshops to teach everyone facilitation skills. He looked immensely relieved. Which brings me to my last point, which is that everyone who facilitates needs to become a teacher so that these skills become ingrained in every employee and leader.

Confrontational Facilitation

There are times when a facilitator knows that group members are being polite while the 'real' issues remain unspoken. While facilitation isn't a confrontational activity most of the time, there are situations in which you'll make the greatest contribution to the group by pushing members beyond their comfort zone. Sometimes clients will even ask to be pushed. They might say "we need to face our problems" or "force us to look at our deficiencies" or "don't let us get away with the easy answers." In these situations you're missing the boat by standing by quietly!

Confrontational facilitation is not for beginners. Confronting people to get them to move out of their comfort zone or challenging traditional boundaries is for more advanced practitioners who can handle any conflicts that might get rolling. He or she must be able to make interventions or facilitate assertive if participant behaviors deteriorate.

Assuming an assertive stance also requires that you carefully set up the right norms and make sure its acceptable to participants that you become more confrontational. Once the right norms are in place and the group understands what you're doing, you can try any of the following techniques to apply pressure:

Start off the session by asking a sequence of challenging questions designed to raise issues and create discontent with the current situation. These can be true/false questions such as:

“We have strategies to deal with up-coming change”

“Our people are ready to deal with the future”

“We know exactly what our customers need”

Randomly ask people to answer and explain their answer. Invite others to add their comments. Post the results so serves as an inspiration for the rest of the session. Challenge the members to incorporate them into their plans.

Post a list of the assumptions that drive the business. These could have been gathered from the pre-workshop interviews. Divide members in sub-groups to systematically challenge each one. Share ideas in a plenary session. Post the best ideas and keep reminding members to act on them.

At the mid-way point of the session, post a survey to help the group assess progress made. Share the outcome and discuss what can be done about any low ratings.



Mid-Point Check

Question	Definitely Not!			Absolutely!	
1. We are really making meaningful progress.	1	2	3	4	5
2. We are dealing with the right issues.	1	2	3	4	5
3. We are being totally honest and open.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Our solutions are really innovative and will generate major improvements.	1	2	3	4	5

Just when people think they have good answers, challenge them to think of two or three alternative solutions for the same situation.

Get people to put on other hats. Ask them what they would do if they owned the company ... If they were the customer ... If they were the shareholder ... If they were the mailroom clerk ... etc. Rotate the hats to different people or groups in the room.

Issue a direct challenge. Announce that you don't think they are really getting to the truth or good solutions or whatever. Tell them that they need to dig deeper. Make a speech about what it takes to thrive in today's world. Give them a pep talk about how they need to do better.

Use silence to advantage. Expect and accept that there may be awkwardness or heavy silence associated with any confrontation. Don't let this throw you. Identify the silence by letting it hand until one of them breaks it with a suggestion. "I'm sensing we have hit a nerve. Let's sit and think for a minute until someone comes up with a suggestion."

If the feelings in the room are so sensitive that no one is willing to say anything, break people into subgroups of two or three members to discuss the current situation and generate solutions. Hold a plenary to gather up ideas once people have had a chance to get over their unease and focus on solutions.

All experienced facilitators have stories about meetings where the discussion was purely superficial until they confronted the group. Its a sad truth that some meetings only get meaningful after people have been confronted and forced to face the truth. The more experienced you are the more intolerant you'll become of discussions that waste people's valuable time and more ready to use confrontational methods.

Never take confronting lightly. Make sure the approach fits the situation and is well timed. Most important never do something simply to make yourself feel powerful or look smart.

* Reprinted with permission of the author from: Facilitating With Ease! by Ingrid Bens. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Tom Justice

Facilitation Defined

My definition of Group Facilitation is a functional one.

Facilitation is the design and management of structures and processes that help a group do its work and minimize the common problems people have working together.*

Facilitation is therefore a neutral (in relation to the content and participants) process that focuses on:

- What needs to be accomplished
- Who needs to be involved
- Design, flow and sequence of tasks
- Communication patterns, effectiveness and completeness
- Appropriate levels of participation and the use of resources
- Group energy, momentum and capability
- The physical and psychological environment

The work of facilitation can be framed in three phases: Preparation, Working with the Group and Follow up. Each phase has intended outcomes and primary tasks as depicted in Figure 1.

* Justice & Jamieson, The Complete Guide to Facilitation- Pre-publication Draft, 1999



PREPARATION	GROUP WORK	FOLLOW UP
<p><u>Outcomes:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Group organized 2) Membership determined 3) Purposes clear 4) Roles clarified 5) Logistics planned 6) Facilitation work contract clear 7) Group, work, participants, and context understood. 8) Agenda determined and communicated 	<p><u>Outcomes:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9) Meeting purposes and outcomes achieved 10) Participants worked well together 11) Participants satisfied with progress 12) Meeting design effectively implemented 13) Facilitation capacity of group enhanced 14) Next steps clear 15) Effective group task and maintenance behaviors observed 	<p><u>Outcomes:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 16) Meeting record/outputs produced and distributed 17) Results of group work communicated to members, sponsors and stakeholders 18) Approvals of results obtained & announced 19) Next steps carried out 20) Need for further group work determined
<p><u>Primary Tasks:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 21) Establishing the contract for facilitation 22) Collecting information on context, work, participants 23) Clarifying the group charter 24) Analyzing stakeholders 25) Selecting group members and group leader 26) Building agendas for meetings 27) Publishing agenda & disseminating information 28) Attending to meeting logistics 	<p><u>Primary Tasks:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 29) Creating a foundation for working together 30) Managing data generation 31) Managing analysis and interpretation of the data 32) Managing Decision Making 33) Managing Group Dynamics 34) Evaluating group process and progress 35) Closing group sessions 	<p><u>Primary Tasks:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 36) Preparing the meeting record and outputs 37) Informing and communicating with others 38) Obtaining approvals of group work 39) Monitoring interim/ implementation work 40) Identifying further needs for group work

Figure 1. Facilitation Phases

Core Beliefs, Values and Principles

My core beliefs, values and principles related to facilitation include:

1. Good ideas should be implemented with a minimum political interference.
2. Innovation and efficacious tradition are dueling life-forces of the organization that must be equitably valued and balanced.
3. Participation doesn't mean everybody's involved in everything at the same time or that all decisions are group decisions. It does mean that more often than not, you have an opportunity to participate in most critical decisions that effect you.
4. Good planning and solutions to complex problems need adequate time for development. Without enough time, re-invention wheels keep spinning and wasting the precious limited design time available to most organizations.
5. The best ideas come from those most expert and the most passionate of those in the domain under consideration, not necessarily from an equitable representation of stakeholders.
6. Effective process design and effective facilitation are two separate competencies, not always contained in the same person. Many good designers are not good facilitators and vice versa.
7. Effective facilitation of groups works for those leaders and organizations that want it, not for those that "need it." Most leaders are primarily "task" oriented (idea driven) or "process" oriented (people driven). Facilitators seldom succeed with the task-oriented leader.
8. The effective facilitator will know or least be conversant in the content domain within which they are working (e.g. engineering, education, manufacturing, technology.) If they don't know the domain they will only be successful if they are extremely likable and charming following rather pat processes.
9. Most group facilitators are closet control freaks who deep down are sure they are ordained to know what's best for the group and the world.
10. Facilitators don't make change happen. Effective leaders do. Groups without leaders fail or produce minimal results.
11. There's nothing wrong with the status quo. Maintaining the status quo is better than implementing a half- baked idea. Groups need to be patient and hold on until they get it right.
12. Groups, properly conducted, will always outperform the brightest individual.



13. There are three steps and one principle that will lead to superior results for every task group. First, find and generate good data. Second, take the time to analyze the data. 3) Pick the best alternatives for action on the basis of the analysis. And finally, the one principle for success is to do the three steps in order.
14. The effective use of groups and teams makes management less certain and more difficult.
15. Representative participation by stakeholders in group process does not necessarily either a) improve the quality of the ideas or b) improve buy-in toward ideas and proposals.

The Role of the Facilitator*

Good facilitators are hard to find and develop. Most people are more used to being a player (active or passive) or being in charge (running things). A neutral guide with an active role in process management is a foreign concept for many people in organizations. A good facilitator needs to draw from certain knowledge bases and develop certain skills in order to design effectively and intervene appropriately.

The effective facilitator also needs to be competent in carrying out the core processes, and fundamental skills of facilitation. Finally, certain personal characteristics are helpful in facilitator roles.

Core Processes

What do facilitators do? They work in a variety of capacities across the phases of facilitation. However, most facilitation revolves around eight primary core processes:

1. Analyzing Information about purposes, desired outcomes, work context and participants to determine the best approach.
2. Designing meetings to enable groups to succeed at their purposes using appropriate structures, processes and sequences.
3. Establishing group climate, norms, and roles with the group to help them do their work.
4. Creating and implementing structures and processes to accomplish tasks and meet objectives.
5. Intervening to manage group dynamics, enforce norms, and influence what the group is doing or how they are doing it.

* Justice & Jamieson- The Complete Guide to Facilitation- Pre-publication Draft, 1997

6. Coaching/training group leaders and members in effective behaviors.
7. Evaluating meeting and facilitation effectiveness to make adaptations and enhance the group's learning.
8. Navigating decision processes through the established organizational hierarchy or decision structure.
9. Ensuring follow-up action related to production and distribution of the meeting record, results, communication with stakeholders, and implementation of decisions.

Fundamental Skills

There are certain fundamental skills that facilitators need to be effective. These include:

- Contracting
- Designing structured activities and processes
- Listening, paraphrasing, observing, clarifying, elaborating
- Interpreting verbal and non-verbal behavior
- Confronting
- Managing differences
- Collaborating
- Project management
- Meeting management
- Logistics management.

In one sense, these can be seen as pre-qualifications for effective facilitation. The more specific facilitation tools presented in this book require competent execution using these basic skills.

Personal Characteristics

Finally, personal characteristics play a role in being facilitative. The characteristics that seem most effective are:

- Steadiness (Serenity- calm and centered)
- Confidence



- Assertiveness
- Openness
- Flexibility
- Authenticity
- Humility
- Optimism
- Results Oriented

The willingness and ability to detach and relinquish control of the results of the work of the group represent, perhaps, the most significant personal challenge faced by the facilitator.

Though the knowledge, skills and personal characteristics required of the successful facilitator represent a formidable challenge, the person learning to be a facilitator should not be disheartened. Fully competent professional facilitators are continually and simultaneously working on all three of these areas. Developing and sustaining competence as a facilitator requires on-going, simultaneous pursuit of the knowledge, skills, and characteristics outlined above.

Critical Success Factors- What Matters Most for the Practicing Facilitator

What makes a facilitator? What really matters most? Are there a few things that, if done well, will guarantee that a group can be successful? And could those keys be so important, that if one is left out, the facilitator is likely to fail? And if we knew what those things were, wouldn't we be more able to train the practicing facilitator faster, more effectively? These are the key questions that this article is intended to examine.

First though, let's clarify what is meant here by "critical success factors." Critical success factors are those things that you must be or have to be successful in any given endeavor.* "Critical success factor analysis" is a wonderfully flexible and useful tool, popularized in the 1980's following the classic article published in the Harvard Business review by Hardaker and Ward.** Shortly after its publication, I began using it in my practice to help organizations strategically plan. I used it following mission statement development in strategic planning sessions. Since then I have discovered multiple uses for in working with groups. I used it to help the internal consultants in an aerospace firm plan how they could best reach their clients. I used it to help one of my clients determine what was most successful to win a 2.5 + million dollar contract and to organize themselves accordingly. (They won) In fact, perhaps because the technique is so powerful, I have actually found myself having to suppress the urge to use it for almost anything that I do. I think most facilitators have a few techniques they are particularly drawn to and they tend to overuse them. The "CSF" technique is certainly one of those for me. I have come to caution myself before using the technique in any given situation. Recently, I wrote

up the procedure for publication in the recently published, *The Complete Guide to Facilitation* so it could be more widely shared with the facilitator audience. (HRD Press, 1998)

The “gist” of the technique is that you can accomplish anything you set out to do if you can just determine what are the factors most critical to your success in achieving the goal. The process of identifying CSFs requires that the group first be clear on between five and nine CSF’s necessary to accomplish the mission. Then the group proceeds to identify between five and nine CSF’s necessary to accomplish the mission.

Every CSF must be absolutely necessary to success, and all of them together must be sufficient to ensure success. The group can stop after having identified the CSFs or can proceed with several other planning steps for a more comprehensive planning session. (viz. Identification of key processes to accomplish each CSF, prioritization of the processes and “owner” identification for each of the processes.)

What are these factors most critical to success? Well, there are several ways to look at critical success factors. There are a few clues already offered by others that I know of. who haven spoken or written in a similar vein. Michael Doyle, author of the classic *Making Meetings Work* has offered the characteristics of the effective facilitator, based on his considerable experience as a facilitator and having hired scores of facilitators. The characteristics that Doyle reported as criteria for hiring facilitators are:

- Heart
- Tolerance for ambiguity
- Conceptual skills
- Interpersonal skills (like people)
- Good health
- Knowledge of self
- Stamina

These seem like unarguable criteria for selecting facilitators. The characteristics offered focus on what it takes to repeatedly be successful acting as a facilitator in a group session. If any one of these things is lacking, it is doubtful that a person will be able to have sustained success working with a group.

In a similar analysis to Doyle’s, Michael Wilkinson* of Leadership Strategies Institute in Atlanta recently presented an analysis of the “7 Separators Differentiating Good and Great Facilitation.” These “separators were based on interviews with practicing facilitators. The “Seven Separators” are:

1. Establish and maintain a high energy level.



2. Ask starting questions (for group exercises) that draw a vivid image.
3. Have a full tool kit of follow-up questions. (Probes, questions to generate best data)
4. Recognize the “power of the pen.” (Record in group memory exactly what’s said)
5. Carry the group through the process. (Clarify steps in process: Review, Preview, Purpose, Directions, etc.)
6. Separate neutrality from passivity. (Maintain neutrality while actively challenging group)
7. Design customized processes to address a sponsor’s need.

Though these facilitator attributes do seem to offer value for distinguishing “good” from “great” facilitation, it is quite possible to envision facilitated sessions where all seven of these factors were operating and the alternatives generated by the group went nowhere.

Bill Daniels, Author of *Group Power I* and *Group Power II* offers yet another “take” on what is most critical to facilitation success. Bill has created a distinctive new paradigm for his facilitation work. He sees himself more as a coach to help the manager achieve what is most critical and urgent. Bill sees his mission as “supporting his client’s survival agenda.” The “survival agenda” is what is most urgent and critical to gain competitive advantage. Urgency is defined as what must be accomplished in the next 90 days. Bill feels that the focus belongs there because he notices that when the focus is any further out than 90 days he is “spending the time trying to teach my own concerns to someone.” In order to work fast on the survival agenda, he works almost exclusively on the regular meetings being conducted by his clients, offering coaching and counsel to the manager, mostly prior to and after the regular meetings. In his alternative way of looking at facilitation, 80% of the facilitation is done before the meeting ever occurs. He sees 4 factors as critical to facilitation success from his view:

- 1) Identified results
- 2) Right people attending
- 3) Valid process design
- 4) Leader preparation

In a 1997 IAF presentation in Oklahoma City, I sought to identify the critical success factors for each of 3 stages of facilitation involved in enabling groups to succeed. “1) Preparation, 2) Working with the Group, and 3) Follow-up. With help from co-author Dave Jamieson, I proposed the three sets of CSF’s, each set representing the goal of each of the 3 stages.

For Stage 1, Preparation, the goal of which is “To set the group up to succeed”, you must be or have:

- Clear Purpose and Outcomes
- Fast Paced, Quality Process Designs
- 2x Meeting Time in Planning
- A Charter Clearly Understood by Participants
- Sponsorship at Right Level and Authority
- Sufficient Expertise
- Commitment of People Affected
- A Strong Leader

For Stage 2, Working with the Group, the goal of which is “To design improvements in the status quo,” you must be or have:

- Attention to Fundamentals (e.g., listening, recording, eye contact)
- Decisions
- Task-Oriented Small Group Participation
- Buy-in to Agenda
- Facilitator Detachment from Content Positions
- Good Processes
- Flexible Execution

For Stage 3, Follow- up, the goal of which is “To put the outputs of the group into practice,” you must be or have:

- Explicit Approvals
- Clear Implementation Steps
- Implementation Owners
- Well organized, substantive, attractive outputs
- Support for Decisions



- Follow through people
- Front line supervisor support

These criteria, though certainly more representative of a broader facilitation agenda are too many for the average facilitator to keep in mind while they are in the process of designing sessions and working with groups. My current task is to establish 7 simple critical success factors that are what you must be or have to accomplish the following mission:

“To enable groups to succeed, success being defined as the generation of alternatives that represent an improvement in the status quo and are superior in quality to those generated by individuals and that the alternatives are implemented within the organizational system(s) for which they are designed.”

This is a somewhat more expansive than traditional view of facilitation, but I believe a necessary one if we are to become a truly vital profession that makes things happen rather than one that just helps people feel better about working together. I hope that our IAF session in Toronto will contribute toward the synthesizing of the original work done for the three facilitation stages.

There is one other way to look at “critical success factors” that may have value for many practicing facilitators. I think that each of us has our own set of “CSF’s” that we need to focus on that make us successful on any given day in helping groups to be successful. Call them “personal” critical success factors. Every time I am going to work with a group I focus on being or having these things when I facilitate.:

- Plenty of rest
- Preparation appropriate to the agenda
- “In synch” with the leader
- In room 1 hr. Ahead
- Intense, in-depth empathic listening
- Invisible
- Good processes

Over the years of working with groups, I have noticed that one of these things was missing when I was “off” my game and things didn’t go as well as I hoped they would. The factors I listed above are all things that I don’t necessarily do “automatically” even after having facilitated hundreds of meetings. They are things that I have to consciously create every time I work. And I think these success factors are different for each of us. Mine aren’t necessarily yours. So, my final suggestion is for you to inventory your own facilitation experience. Think about when things have worked and when they haven’t. What’s made the difference? What are

those things that you need to constantly keep in mind, most of which don't come "naturally" for you without conscious effort? Write them down and commit to yourself that you'll work on doing "what matters most" for your own success every time you go out to work with a group. By taking care of yourself in this way, you'll also be enabling your group to succeed.

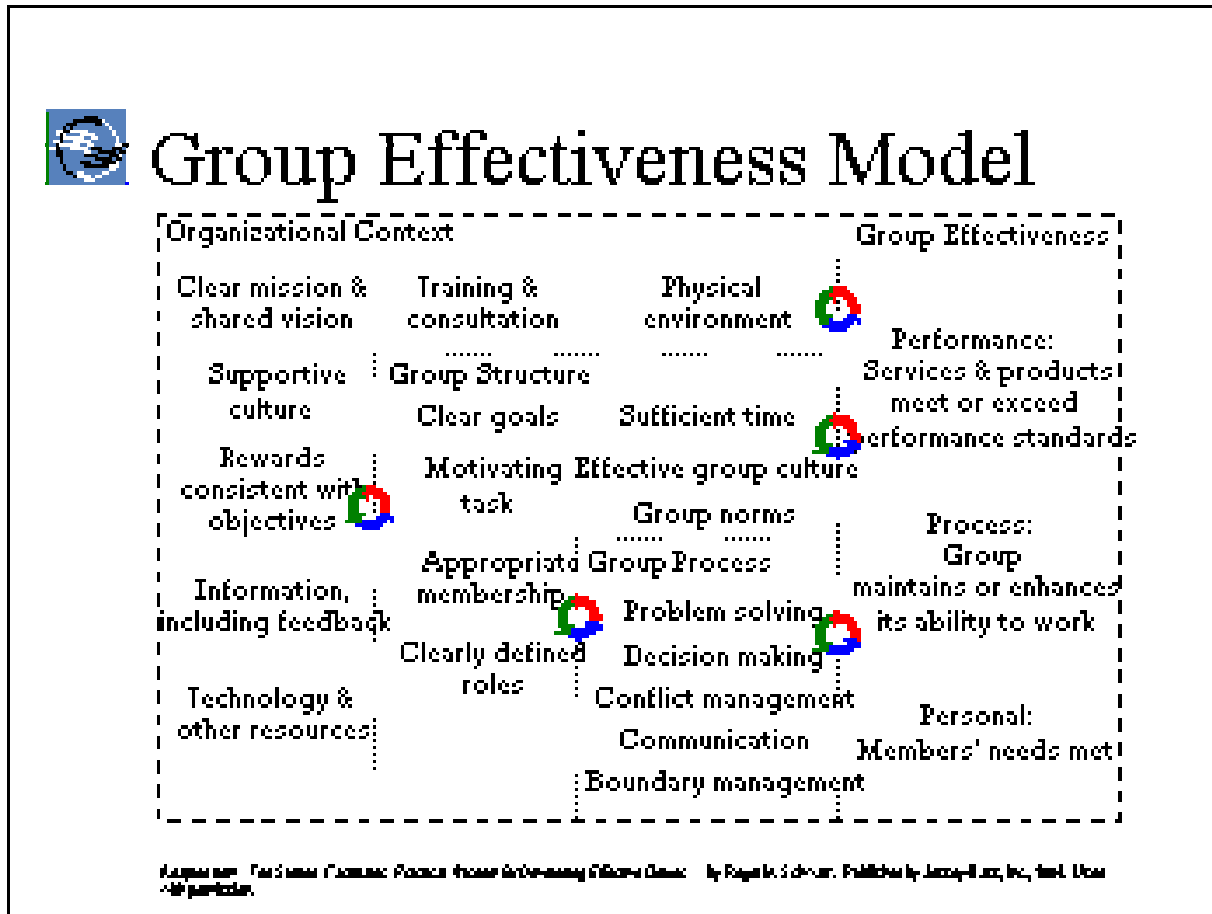
Roger M. Schwarz*

The Skilled Facilitator approach is one approach to facilitation—an approach I have been developing since 1980 when I began teaching others facilitation skills. The Skilled Facilitator approach is based on a theory of group facilitation that contains a set of core values and principles and a number of techniques and methods based on the core values and principles. It integrates the theory into the practice to create a values-based systems approach to group facilitation. Below I describe the key elements of The Skilled Facilitator approach (For more detail on this approach, read *The Skilled Facilitator: Practical Wisdom for Developing Effective Groups* by Roger M. Schwarz, published by Jossey-Bass Publishers).

The Group Effectiveness Model

Because facilitators are called on to help groups become more effective, we need a model of group effectiveness as part of our approach. To be useful, the model needs to tell us what an effective group should look like. The Skilled Facilitator approach includes a Group Effectiveness Model that identifies the criteria for effective groups, identifies the elements that contribute to effectiveness and the relationships among them, and describes what these elements look like in practice. The model enables us to identify when groups are having problems, identify the causes that generate the problems, and begin to identify where to intervene to address the problems. When we are creating new groups, the model helps us identify the elements and relationships among the elements that need to be in place to ensure an effective group.

* Roger Schwarz, Ph.D. is an organizational psychologist and president of Roger Schwarz & Associates, a Chapel Hill, NC based consulting group that helps groups and organizations use facilitative skills to create fundamental change.



A Clearly Defined Facilitative Role

To help groups, we need to clearly define our facilitative role so that we and the groups we help have a common understanding about and agree on the kinds of behaviors that are consistent and inconsistent with our role. The Skilled Facilitator approach defines the facilitator role as a substantively neutral person who is not a group member, who works for the entire group, and who helps a group improve the way it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions, in order to increase the group's effectiveness.

The Skilled Facilitator approach recognizes that everyone needs to use facilitative skills even if they are not neutral third parties or not working in groups or teams. So, it includes the roles of facilitative consultant, facilitative trainer, as well as facilitator and facilitative leader. Furthermore, the approach recognizes that people often move back and forth among these facilitative roles in the course of the work. Because all of these facilitative roles are based on the same underlying core values and principles, you can use The Skilled Facilitator approach in all of your roles and be viewed by others as acting consistently and with integrity across situations.


The Skilled Facilitator approach distinguishes between two types of facilitation – basic and developmental. In basic facilitation, facilitators help a group solve a substantive problem by essentially lending the group their process skills. When the work is complete the group has solved its substantive problem but, by design, has not learned how it improve its process. In

developmental facilitation, facilitators help a group solve a substantive problem and learn to improve their process at the same time. Here the facilitator also serves as teacher so the group can eventually become self-facilitating. Developmental facilitation requires significantly more time and skill, and is more likely to create fundamental change.

Explicit Core Values

All approaches to facilitation are based on some core values. Core values provide the foundation for an approach and serve as a guide. The Skilled Facilitator approach is based on an explicit set of core values and principles that follow from them. The core values are valid information, free and informed choice, and internal commitment. The core values were developed by Chris Argyris and Don Schön.

Making the core values explicit enables facilitators to understand not only a set of methods and techniques but also how and why they work. They enable us to craft new methods and techniques consistent with the core values and to continually reflect on how well we act congruently with the values.



Core Values of Skilled Facilitation

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Valid Information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Share all relevant info. and reasoning ■ So others understand ■ Info. is independently confirmable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Free & Informed Choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Define objectives and methods ■ Not coerced/manipulated ■ Based on valid info.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Internal Commitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ownership of decisions ■ Commitment to implementation ■ Monitor decision and seek info.

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Making the core values explicit also helps us work with groups. As facilitators, we can discuss our approach with others so that they can make more informed choices about whether they want to use our services. When those we work with know the core values underlying our approach, they can help us improve our practice, identifying when they believe we are acting



inconsistently with the values we espoused. Because the core values for facilitation are also the core values for effective group behavior, when we act consistently with the core values we model effective behavior for the groups we are working with.

Ground Rules for Effective Groups

As facilitators we need to understand the specific kinds of behaviors that improve a group's process. The Skilled Facilitator approach describes these behaviors in a set of ground rules for effective groups. The ground rules make specific the abstract core values of facilitation effective groups. Examples of the ground rules are test assumptions and inferences, share all relevant information, and agree on what important words mean, and explain the reasons behind your statements, questions, and actions.



Ground Rules for Effective Groups

1. Test assumptions and inferences.
2. Share all relevant information.
3. Use specific examples and agree on what important words mean.
4. Discuss undiscussable issues.
5. Focus on interests, not positions.
6. Explain the reasoning and intent behind your statements, questions, and actions.
7. Balance advocacy with inquiry.
8. Jointly design next steps and ways to test disagreements.
9. Keep the discussion focused.
10. Make decisions by consensus.

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The ground rules serve several functions. First, they serve as a diagnostic tool. By understanding the ground rules we can quickly identify effective and ineffective group behavior. Second, the ground rules serve as a teaching tool for developing effective group norms. When groups understand the ground rules and commit to using them, they set new expectations for how they will interact with each other. This enables the group to share responsibility for improving their process, often a goal of facilitation. Finally, the ground rules guide our behavior as facilitators and facilitative leaders.

Group members may choose to practice the ground rules. However, because the ground rules represent principles for effective group process, facilitators using this approach use the ground rules to diagnosis and intervene even if group members choose not to practice the ground rules themselves.

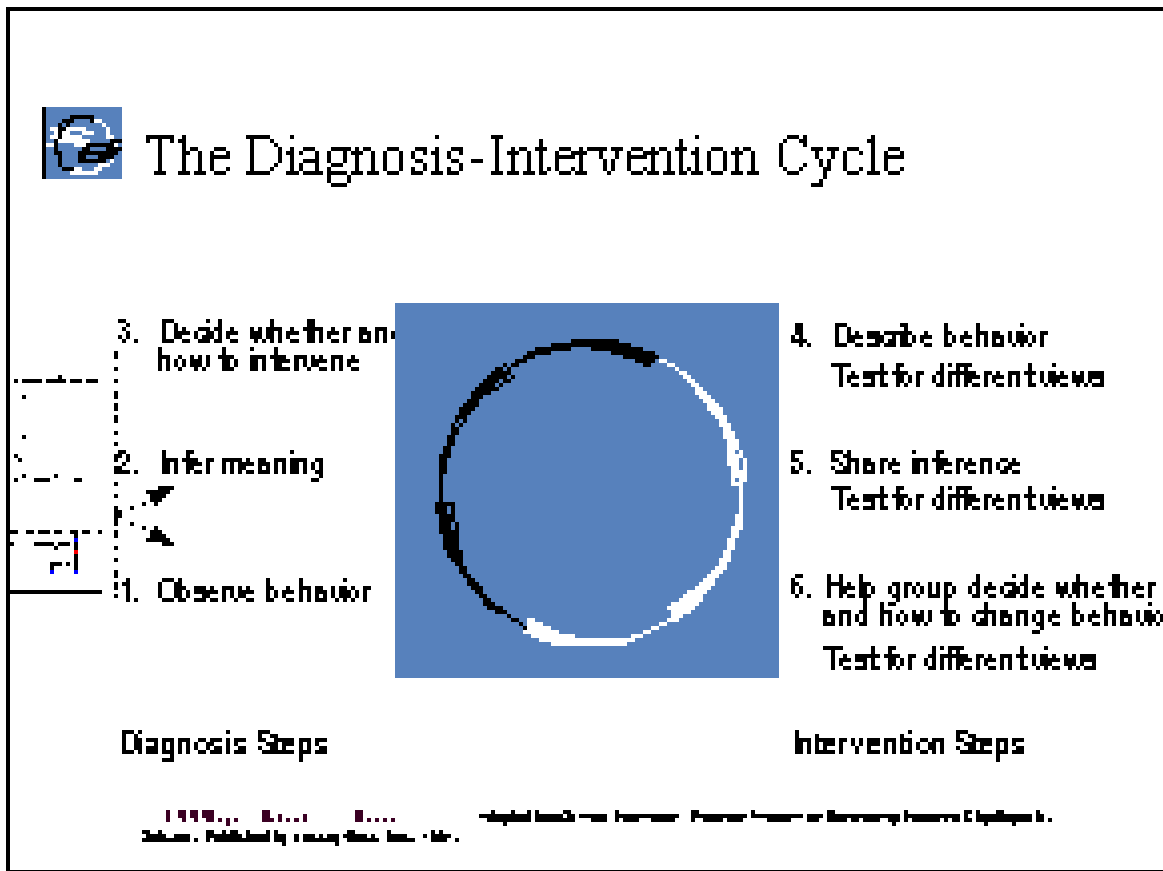
The Diagnosis–Intervention Cycle

The group effectiveness model, the core values, and the ground rules for effective groups are all tools for diagnosing behavior in groups. But facilitators still need a way to implement these tools. Specifically we need to know when to intervene, what kind of intervention to make, how to say it, when to say it, and to whom. To help put these tools into practice, The Skilled Facilitator approach uses a six step process called the diagnosis–intervention cycle. The cycle provides a structured and simple way to think about what is happening in the group and then to intervene consistently with the core values. It serves as a guide for effective action.

Several fundamental principles underlie this approach to diagnosis and intervention. First, our diagnosis needs to be based on observable behaviors. Second, because our diagnosis is based on inferences, we need to test our diagnosis with the group as part of our interventions. Third, our interventions need to be transparent; that is, we need to be able to fully explain to the group the reasoning for our interventions.

Low–level Inferences

As facilitators, we are constantly trying to make sense of what is happening in a group. We watch members say and do things and then we make inferences about what their behavior means and how it is either helping or hindering the group’s process. An inference is a conclusion we reach about something that is unknown to us based on things that we have observed. For example, in a meeting if we see someone silently folding his arms across his chest, we may infer that he disagrees with what has been said but is not saying so.



The kind of inferences we make are critical because they guide what we will say when we intervene, and they affect how group members will react to us. To be effective we need to make these inferences in a way that increases the chance that we will be accurate, that enables us to share our inferences with the group to see if they disagree, and that does not create defensive reactions in group members when we share our inferences with them.

The Skilled Facilitator approach values making as low-level inferences as possible. Essentially, this means that facilitators diagnose and intervene in groups by making the fewest and the smallest inferential leaps necessary. The approach uses higher-level inferences when necessary, but always in a way that requires the facilitator to explain how he or she made his or her inferences based on the observable data in the group.

Exploring and Changing Our Theory-in-Use

The Skilled Facilitator approach assumes that our effectiveness is likely to decrease under conditions we find difficult—either because they are potentially embarrassing or psychologically threatening. As the work of Chris Argyris and Don Schön demonstrates, in these situations, we use a set of core values and think in a way that we seek to unilaterally control the conversation, win the discussion, and minimize the expression of negative feelings. We think of ourselves as knowing all we need to know about the situation while thinking others who disagree are uninformed, as being right and others as being wrong, and as having pure motives while others motives are questionable. All of this leads us to act in ways that create the very results we are

trying hard to avoid –misunderstanding, increasing conflict, defensive reactions, and the strained relationships and lack of learning that accompany them. To make matters worse, we are usually unaware of how our own thinking leads us to act ineffectively. Rather, we typically attribute the cause of these difficult conversations to how others are thinking and acting. Together, how we think and act and the consequences they generate make up our theory–in–use. The same problem that reduces our effectiveness as facilitators reduces the effectiveness of the groups we are seeking to help. And like us, the groups are also unaware of how they create these problems for themselves.

The Skilled Facilitator approach helps us understand the conditions under which we act ineffectively and understand how our own thinking leads us to act ineffectively in ways that we are normally unaware of. It provides tools for increasing our effectiveness, particularly in situations we find difficult. Using the same tools, it enables developmental facilitators to help groups improve their effectiveness.

A Process for Agreeing on How to Work Together

The Skilled Facilitator approach considers contracting – agreeing with the client group on how we will work together – as an essential part of facilitation. This includes developing a clear agreement with the group about our role and how we will work with the group to help it accomplish its objectives. The Skilled Facilitator approach describes a process for developing this agreement that enables the facilitator and the group to make an informed free choice about working together.

Two basic principles underlie the approach. First, only the group who will receive the facilitation skills is capable of contracting with the facilitator for services. Second, the facilitator’s client – and thus the contract – is with the entire group he or she is working with, not with the leader alone or a subset of the group.

A Systems Approach

The Skilled Facilitator approach uses a systems approach. It recognizes that a group is a social system, and that as facilitators, we enter into this system when we work with a group. Our challenge is to enter the system—complete with its functional and dysfunctional dynamics—and help become more effective without our becoming influenced by the system to act ineffectively ourselves. The Skilled Facilitator approach recognizes that any action we take affects the group in multiple ways and has short–term and long–term consequences, some of which are not obvious to us. Consequently, we need to understand how our behavior as facilitators interacts with the group’s dynamics to increase and decrease the group’s effectiveness.

For example, facilitators who privately pull a team member aside who they believe is dominating the group may, in the short–term, seem to improve the team’s discussion. But it may also have several unintended negative consequences. The pulled–aside member may feel that the facilitator is not representing the team’s opinion and may see the facilitator as biased against him, thereby reducing the facilitator’s credibility with that member. Even if the facilitator is reflecting the other team members’ opinions, the team may come increasingly to depend on the facilitator to deal with its issues, thereby reducing rather than increasing the team’s ability to function.



Summary

Together, the elements of The Skilled Facilitator approach interact to form a values–based systems approach for facilitation and facilitative leadership. The approach is a practical one that is grounded in theory and that can help groups create fundamental changes in the way they work.

Part II: Critical Incidents

Practicing facilitators were asked to identify critical incidents as follows:

Can you think of a situation that challenged you as a group facilitator? ... that resulted in your learning something fundamental about the practice of group facilitation? ... that caused you to feel proud that you did the right thing, ... or made you wonder if you had?

Following are several critical incidents generously reported by colleagues. The names of individuals, organizations and places referred to in these vignettes has been changed.

Critical Incident #1: Is this the right team leader?

Shelby Harrison

In forming a new team, management didn't feel they had enough knowledge about the participants, so they decided to let the team choose their own leader. The team went through five days of training together before the initial team formation meeting. During their first forming meetings, which I facilitated, they discussed as a team the responsibilities of team leadership, the kind of work is involved, etc. Each team member talked about their own particular skills and whether or not they felt like a leadership position was for them. They used a slip method for each member to share who they felt would be the best to lead their team. Two of the seven members received endorsement from their team members. The team decided to have the two members serve as leader and back-up team leader. I felt uneasy about this choice. My intuition about the person selected as team leader was telling me that he wasn't the right person.

What would you do? What principles and values would guide you?

What actually happened #1:

In retrospect, I wish they had spent some time work working together as a team before a leader was selected.

Critical Incident #2: The team blows up!

Shelby Harrison

This is a continuation of critical incident #1. As facilitator, I spent a significant amount of time trying to encourage the team leader to use a more participative style. Oftentimes he was autocratic, did not listen well or accept any ideas which differed too much from his own. On the positive side, he was incredibly enthusiastic and committed to the success of the project. He seemed to have a lot of his self worth invested in the success of the project and he REALLY

liked being the team leader. Things came to a head when the team learned that the team leader had been making agreements without their prior knowledge and also had forwarded team member e-mails to people outside of the team with disparaging messages attached to them which made the team members look bad and the team leader look good. What a mess! The team was blowing up.

What would you do? What principles and values would guide you?

What actually happened #2:

We called a special meeting. I decided to use the team's ground rules and some of Roger Schwarz's ground rules to initiate a discussion about what was happening in the team. The team members sat in a circle and I sat outside of the circle and just watched. The ground rules provided an excellent catalyst for the team to discuss their feelings of betrayal and to clarify their expectations of each other. Ultimately the team leader decided that it would be best for the team if he did not continue on as the leader.

The lessons I learned in these situations is that facilitation is more about people (duh) than tools, techniques and processes. It's about doing your best with the process so that the people involved are able to maintain their dignity. I've also learned that you need to be able to trust your intuition and your gut. If you sense that something is not quite right...then it probably isn't. Finally, the importance of having and living by ground rules is essential.

Critical Incident #3: The overt non-participant.
Scott Gassman

Early in my career I facilitated a mandatory session on Preventing Sexual Harassment. One of the attendees in particular resented being there. While presentations and exercises were underway, this individual read the newspaper. I was ruffled by the lack of respect shown by this individual and challenged by how to integrate this behavior into the session without acting out of my own abused feelings; I sincerely wanted him to show the group and myself more respect. I was determined to face this situation and not let him distract me or the session; I did not want to collude with him or pretend that he wasn't there.

What would you do? What principles and values would guide you?

What actually happened #3:

Without knowing it at the time, I gave ground rules. They weren't developed participatively; they were direct. No reading newspapers in the session unless you can tie it to the purpose of the meeting. If you didn't want to be there you could leave but you had to take it up with your boss and get permission for not being there. Since the session was a state mandate because of violations of the policy, this would be unlikely.

The individual stayed, put away the newspapers and then as the day wore on grumbled or challenged me aggressively. I deflected his pursuit by asking how others felt about these provocations. Individuals responded. One by one, participants became eloquent speakers. I



can't say that my language was so neutral or clean of some degree of hostility but I managed to engage other attendees to share and express what it was like for them to be with this kind of behavior. The power of the group neutralized the outbursts. The challenges lessened, others spoke up more. Did the oppressed attendee change his stance on harassment? Who knows? I do believe the episode enabled the other participants to realize the power of their voices and actions. The session also taught in a real way how to face intimidators and harassers.

The value that guided me was really the question: What right did I have to stop, or interfere with this reader's tuning out during the session? Choice, free speech, fear of difference, the unknown impact of confrontation and respecting others all filled my head. The answer came from the session's purpose: Prevent Sexual Harassment. This course was mandated because of a discrimination law suit. My role was to foster awareness, to teach skills and to role model how to face perpetrators. The guise of the reader's behavior was that this content or direction didn't matter. To ignore or be idle, would collude with indifference. Inclusion enabled verbalization of thoughts and issues and validated the session's purpose.

Critical Incident #4: Irreconcilable priorities.

Roy Gulick

I was running a resource allocation meeting for the Spinal and Nerve Research Association. They had assembled a group of fifteen first-rate medical clinicians and researchers, each of whom was a Ph.D., MD, or both. Their task was to propose and prioritize R&D projects in electromagnetic stimulation of nerve endings to regrow severed spinal cord nerves. Their mental models and the formal resource allocation model were still diverging at the beginning of the third day. One of the participants, an older, respected professor and author of a well known book on the focal subject, sat back in his chair twirling the collar of the tweed jacket and smoking his ever-present pipe (couldn't smoke one in today's conferences!) and said, calmly, "We might as well all leave ... this group isn't going to agree on any priorities. We all think our own work is wonderful and number one." He got to his feet and started to leave. The others stared at me.

What would you do? What principles and values would guide you?

What actually happened #4:

I walked over to the window, which overlooked a shopping center. I said, "Professor, there's a Radio Shack store across the street. If you leave and the others go with you, then I'm going to ask their staff to come over here and evaluate your research. After all, they know something about electrical signals. Should I do that, or do we proceed?" He hesitated, smiled, came back and said that we should proceed, adding that he didn't hold out much hope that we would produce a good research program.

By mid-afternoon, the models started to converge, and we put together a solid program that was prioritized using multiple estimated cost and expected benefit criteria. As we made the final refinements, the professor raised his hand. I nodded. He smiled, and said that he just wanted the group to know that he, in particular, agreed strongly with the result, and added that he

thought the judgments were sound and the order of priority was just what it should be. He then apologized to me in front of the group, and thanked me for sticking with it.

When he returned to his university, he wrote a one-page note to our company president, expressing his thanks to me for a well-done process. I still have the letter, and value it.

The lesson is, of course, to get the group to stick with it. I now let them know in advance about the divergence and convergence, pointing out that, almost invariably, the convergence doesn't occur until mid-morning on the final day.

Critical Incident #5: Too many participants.

Roy Gulick

I worked with the Navy to design a decision conference on prioritizing requirements for advanced logistics systems for Naval surface ships. The design was sound. They asked me how many participants there should be. I said ideally 15, but a maximum of 22. As we got closer to the date, my client informed me that he wanted to bring 25. I reluctantly said okay. Three days before the conference, he said it was up to 35. I asked that he identify ten observers, letting the other 25 be participants. When I arrived at the conference, there were more chairs than I could imagine, and a total of 63 Navy officers and civilians came. No observers had been designated. It was a mess.

What would you do? What principles and values would guide you?

What actually happened #5:

We got the job done, setting priorities, but no one was happy. Those who had a lot to say, couldn't. Those who shouldn't have said anything, did.

Lesson. Persuade your client to hold it down. It's an occupational fact in the Navy -- they always want to bring everyone remotely associated with the topic. I've learned to accommodate larger crowds, but only by designating observers. When they raise their hand, I always say, "Aha, an observation."

Critical Incident #6: Will the CEO please leave the organization!

Michael Cassidy

As facilitator, I asked the group of about 20 persons: "If there were something you could do or change to help this organization better realize its mission, what would you do?" Attendees, all of whom were managers in a well-funded non-profit organization, were asked to write responses, one per index card. I had conducted interviews with virtually all attendees prior to the session and it had been suggested that if I asked the question orally, people would be hesitant to "speak up." Hence, the cards. Of the approximately 50 cards received, about 30 of them, in one way or another, suggested that the CEO, Jennifer -- who was present at the meeting -- be asked to leave the organization. This in spite of the fact that the Board had announced that they would support her in her role as CEO for two more years. After a quick review of the cards, I informed the group that many of the cards were related to a single individual. I asked them



what they would like to do. All agreed that if they were not personal attacks about the individual, the cards should be read.

What would you do? What principles and values would guide you?

What actually happened #6:

I read the cards. Jennifer, after remaining quiet for a time, dashed from the room crying. The well-planned and logical agenda was tossed. The remainder of the session was used to put things back together.

When Jennifer was out crying, I found myself chastising the group for using the opportunity to unload a lot of "baggage" they had about Jennifer, particularly since the group knew that the Board supported Jennifer's continuation in her role. In essence, there was no pragmatic value to their suggestions. In this context, and I believe unconsciously, I admonished them for not abiding by the "do unto others" value I try, (unsuccessfully much of the time I must admit), to adhere to. Actually, I asked them how they would have felt if they were Jennifer. I'm still not sure if that was the correct thing to do, but it seemed the only thing appropriate at the time. When Jennifer returned, most attendees were quick to emphasize all that Jennifer had done for the organization.

We met again 2 weeks after the meeting to tie up loose ends and see where next to go. Prior to the meeting, I informed a couple of Board members that I had documented all the comments, was planning to distribute them at the meeting along with other documentation, and then move on to new business. When I passed the materials out, however, Jennifer flew into a rage. I explained to her privately and publicly that it was not my responsibility or right to edit the comments; Jennifer never spoke to me again. I heard later that she took a leave of absence. One by one the management team left the organization. About 6 months later, Jennifer decided to leave as well. After discussions with her replacement, who offered ongoing work to me and a colleague, we declined.

Critical Incident #7: The substitute subordinate.

Larry Phillips

A senior executive was unable to attend a decision conference so he sent a subordinate in his place. At one point, the man suggested that development of a new product could be speeded up for a modest increase in resource. The Managing Director disagreed, saying that much more resource would be needed to meet the time-scale. The man tried to defend his view, but his explanations were not persuasive and the Managing Director became more agitated. As the facilitator I felt concern for the man because he was in a difficult position and was receiving a hammering from the Managing Director, but I also felt that the Managing Director's criticisms were correct. My rising alarm signaled that an intervention was needed, but I was not sure what to do.

What would you do? What principles and values would guide you?

What actually happened #7:

Suddenly the MD rose to his feet and shouted 'Bullshit!'. My uncertainty had led me to wait too long, and now it was too late. I felt even more unsure what to do next, sensing that any intervention at this point might result in my dismissal. Realizing that I had not been adequately in touch with the group life, I did nothing. The group struggled for some time to regain a semblance of normal functioning, but the event was not a success.

Critical Incident #8: International blows.

Larry Phillips

This incident occurred in a tri-national project involving the navies of the UK, France and Italy. The overall aim was to design a new frigate, and the hope was that by doing it jointly each country could get more ship for its money. I facilitated three 3-day decision conferences, with the help of Steve Bond, separated by workshops to pull together relevant data. No fewer than 40 people attended each decision conference, and the roles spanned civilians and navy personnel from each country, covering nearly every aspect of ship systems, operation and procurement. At one point an Italian insulted a Frenchman and they nearly came to blows. A senior Englishman came to the defense of the Frenchman and ordered the Italian to cool it.

What would you do? What principles and values would guide you?

What actually happened #8:

I didn't really have to do anything, though my subsequent facilitation acknowledged the conflict of perspectives. I even admonished the group to learn to live with their differences. I occasionally revert to schoolmasterliness, and I usually regret it later. Too bad facilitators are human. But then, Dr Spock (the Vulcan, not the pediatrician) would have made a lousy facilitator.

Critical Incident #9: I don't think you even have a hundred friends!

Sandor Schuman

The debate in the Central Mountains had become increasingly polarized; interpersonal and interorganizational relationships had deteriorated. The Public Conversations Project convened a group of about 20 environmentalists, developers, forest industry people, sportsmen, and others with diverse views. The aim of the dialogue was to have individuals, however polarized their viewpoints, come together for two days as people, rather than as parties or positions, and understand each other. People were to attend voluntarily as individuals, not as representatives of organizations or constituencies. Given the potential volatility of the meeting they were asked to explicitly agree to a set of ground rules detailed in the invitational letter. One of the ground rules stated "... avoid making negative attributions not only about those in the room, but also those not present." This was especially important in this case because some attendees at previous dialogues in this region had verbally attacked others.



Well into the meeting, the conversation turned to the topic of wilderness and its implications for the future of the region. Some participants expressed the view that wilderness areas did not contribute to the regional economy and were not valued by residents. Others felt that wilderness areas were essential to maintaining the environmental and economic character of the region. One individual, Jeff, asserted, "the people who support wilderness areas are outsiders, they don't live here; local residents who have to make their living here don't see any value in wilderness." In response, Betty claimed, "I know hundreds of residents who support wilderness!" To which Jeff snapped, "I don't think you even have a hundred friends!"

What would you do? What principles and values would guide you?

What actually happened #9

As facilitator I interrupted abruptly and alerted the group to this violation of ground rules. I physically turned to an individual sitting away from the fray and asked him, "what comes to mind when you think of wilderness?" He replied, "Pristine, untouched lands where one can observe nature on its own terms." I asked if anyone had a different interpretation. From across the room another participant said, "I had in mind what it says in the Central Mountains law, that a wilderness area is a designated area in which motor vehicles are not permitted; there can be trails and lean-tos, just no motor vehicles." I turned back to Betty and asked her which definition she had in mind when she said she knew hundreds of residents who supported wilderness. "The definition in the law," she replied. Then I asked Jeff, and he replied, "the pristine wilderness." I followed up with him and asked, "do you think that residents support the designation of areas in which no motor vehicles are allowed?" "Yes," he replied. I paused and then remarked, "So hurtful words were spoken because there were different meanings in use for the same term." I paused for a long time, resisting the temptation to ask Jeff he wanted to apologize, and hoping that he would, but none was forthcoming.

I felt good that I intervened immediately before there was any escalation in this potentially volatile situation. Also, I felt I had done an outstanding job in diagnosing a potential source of miscommunication, the meaning attached to the word wilderness, and I turned out to be correct. Nonetheless I felt that I failed to adequately address the basic violation of the ground rule, nor did I help the group deal with it emotionally. In a way, by dealing with the conflict substantively I undermined my ability to deal with it interpersonally.

Professor Russel Martin drilled into me as an undergraduate, "meanings are in people not in words." When there is conflict ascertain if it is genuine, or based on miscommunication. If the conflict involves the use of a particular word or phrase, define it; to avoid the misconceptions that are created when multiple meanings are inferred from the same word, avoid using the word in favor of its longer definitions.

Critical Incident #10: Do it for us.

Richard Seel

This particular group had been asked to prepare a brief presentation. Although they had a clear grasp of what they wanted to say, they couldn't move on to talking about how to present it.

Instead, they focused on me and kept asking me to do the presentation for them. I don't know why this happened but I did know that I was uncomfortable with it.

What would you do? What principles and values would guide you?

What actually happened #10

Instead of confronting them I muttered some excuse — “Will you just excuse me for a moment ...”, or some such — and left the room. I hung around outside for three or four minutes and then returned. The dynamic in the room had shifted radically. The group were focused on the task, allotting roles to one another and working well together. They hardly noticed my return and I sat quietly for some time until it seemed appropriate to make some intervention.

A facilitator can be put in a powerful position by the group. They can project all their competence onto him or her and this can be very flattering and seductive to the facilitator. I am a good presenter and I enjoy working with an audience — perhaps I transmitted some of that to the group, helping to disempower them.

Anyway, I found myself in a real bind: to do the presentation myself would have been inappropriate and an abdication of the group's responsibility; to ‘order’ them to do it would have been quite wrong in terms of my contract with the group (although it might have ‘worked’ if they really were projecting all their competence onto me). And to persuade or cajole did not seem appropriate either; I wanted the decision to be the group’s yet they seemed clear that they were not going to take responsibility. The pattern had to be broken in a way that did not violate the relationship between facilitator and group. Leaving the room seemed to be the right way to do this — and it worked on this occasion.

I learned a number of lessons from this encounter. I learned the power of inaction; that direct intervention is not always the best way. I gained greater confidence in the power of the group to resolve its own issues — learning to trust the group is, I believe, a great challenge for new facilitators. I learned about the ways in which a facilitator can be idealized by the group and the seductions this offers (what psychodynamic writers refer to as projection and introjection). This time I managed to resist the siren song and learned a lot as a result. I learned that sometimes patterns of relationship are set up which need to be broken by doing something very different — doing more of the same will probably only reinforce the existing state. And, finally, I learned that facilitation is endlessly fascinating and rewarding to me as a person.

Critical Incident #11: At a Loss.

Nancy White

I was facilitating an intense two-day meeting of representatives of competing public and private agencies with the goal of creating a collaborative project. By the middle of the second day, I was exhausted and frustrated; I could sense the frustration of the group. We were about 30 minutes before the lunch break and it was clear to me that our current process was not going to work.



What would you do? What principles and values would guide you?

What actually happened #11

I sat down in front of the group and said that the path I was trying to take them down wasn't working as planned. I did not know what to do and I needed their help. The room was quiet for a moment, then hands went up. All of a sudden, they came to my rescue and generated another wave of energy to get to the next level. They did not want to see their two days wasted either, and were willing, when given the opportunity, to contribute to the process solution as well as the task oriented needs of the agenda/group. By giving up my pride, the group was given some freedom to craft their solution, to take responsibility for their solution. In the write ups afterwards, quite a few people noted they thought that I did a good job at that point, and that it took guts. They even sensed my discomfort and respected it rather than dismissed it. They deserve the credit for this breakthrough.

Subsequently, I find it easier to let go, to retrack if I make a mistake, but openly to the group. To acknowledge that solutions are often in all of our hands, not one person's. And by modeling an openness to "not being perfect" it provides everyone an opportunity to explore a new branch of thinking we may have missed, and makes the meeting a safer place for everyone to take that risk. For we all know, none of us has all the solution, but no one wants to look stupid. The delicate balance. If I can risk it, so can they. And likewise, the solutions we seek are often not where we think they may be, so looking at the edges of things, where issues are less certain, can be very productive. Living on the edge!

Critical Incident #12: Hidden agendas.

Nancy White

This group was a minefield of hidden agendas. The participants knew it, and I learned pretty quickly. But we needed to move forward. As we drew towards the conclusion of our third two-day gathering (this over a period of about a year) we had to come out with a tangible conclusion. We had crafted a proposal, but there was a great deal of tension and concern that someone might drop a blocker.

What would you do? What principles and values would guide you?

What actually happened #12

I named the monster. I asked the groups permission to try a decision making process that would make it harder for anyone to block a decision without explicitly saying why. So to block, you had to open your hidden agenda to the group. I think they were a little shocked. I don't think this is how the game was usually played with this group (it felt more like smile, but never tell). Finally, some of the key issues got on the table. In the end, the agendas did not go away, but there were now some ideas on how to work with them, rather than trying to shoot at them in the dark. My contribution was to help them take responsibility for the blocking issues and not evade them.

Hidden agendas, or agendas that cannot be shared are not uncommon. It is important to recognize this rather than pretend they don't exist. There is some discomfort in taking that

responsibility, but it is worth it to the process. Be open. Be willing to take a risk. Be willing to be wrong and be open. Be willing to take a risk. Be willing to be wrong and learn from it.

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