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TELLING CLIENTS WHAT WE'RE REALLY THINKING: MAKING OUR STRATEGIES

PUBLIC

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### **Abstract**

This paper illustrates how we act inconsistently with espoused facilitator values by keeping our facilitation strategies private. It describes a method for assessing whether our private strategies are manipulative and identifies the steps necessary for creating non-manipulative strategies.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Schwarz and Anne Davidson are the co-presenters for this session. This article was written by Roger Schwarz.



## **Telling Clients What We’re Really Thinking: Making Our Strategies Public**

As facilitators, we espouse authentic communication. We encourage our clients to talk openly and productively about important but difficult issues. We encourage them to move beyond taking simple positions and instead share their reasoning. And yet, at times, we do not model the authentic communication we advocate. We hold back saying what we are really thinking - including our strategy for dealing with the group. Let us look at how this happens, what are the consequences, and how we might act more effectively.

### **One Meeting: Two Conversations**

In every meeting there are two conversations. The first is the public conversation, the one we hear and see in the meeting and can record with a video camcorder. The second is the private conversation. This is the internal conversation we are having with ourselves during the public conversation. Each person in the meeting has his or her own internal conversation. As facilitators, we also have our own private conversation. Our private conversation includes our thoughts and feelings about what is happening in the group and how we might respond.

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**

Wow. She’s not liking what I’ve got them doing.

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

#### **The Conversation**

Barbara: why are we doing this?

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?

### **Facilitator's Thoughts & Feelings**

have such reservations about working for him.

They won't tell the truth. I wonder how many of them really have had it, too.

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!

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!!

They participated in saying what to do today, and the agenda reflects that. Why is she acting like she wants no part of it?

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 want to get a re-org going, so maybe we're not moving fast enough for her on that right now.

Let's see what anyone else thinks. Moe had suggested this overall flow, which I

### **The Conversation**

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.

Facilitator: what could I do to make it more useful?

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.

Facilitator: We built the agenda around the deliverables that everyone agreed to. Is this not reflecting what you thought we'd do?

Barbara: no, no. maybe it's just me. I can't see this getting us anywhere.

Facilitator: how about the rest of you?



### **Facilitator's Thoughts & Feelings**

adjusted, so what is he thinking?

They are defending me, but I somehow don't completely buy it!

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.

### **The Conversation**

Moe: well this is a process that takes time and I think we need to play it out.

Facilitator: well let's try to finish this piece and break for lunch and see how we do.

### **Gaps Between What We Think and What We Say**

Looking at the above dialogue, you may notice that the facilitator is thinking and feeling a number of things that she is not saying. This gap between what is known as the left-hand column and the right-hand column is common in situations we consider difficult - situations in which we feel some kind of psychological threat or potential embarrassment. In these situations we withhold various types of information.

#### Withholding our questions.

Throughout the facilitation, group members say and do things that lead us to privately ask questions. In the example, when Barbara says "I don't think this is getting us where we need to go," the facilitator privately asks, "Why is she acting like she wants no part of it? "

#### Withholding our inferences about the group.

Throughout the facilitation we make inferences about what is occurring in the group. For example, the facilitator infers that : 1) Barbara is not liking the work that the facilitator is having them do; 2) group members won't tell the truth about the situation; and 3) group members are defending the facilitator, but in a way that is insincere. Even the facilitator's private question

“Why is she acting like she wants no part of it? “ has embedded in it an inference that Barbara wants no part of the exercise.

Withholding our concerns.

In the example, the facilitator is concerned that the exercise is not very exciting and that doing it without their boss present will be futile. Yet, the facilitator withholds these concerns from the group.

Withholding our strategies.

Our left-hand column also includes our strategies for how we should facilitate the group. And our strategy is often built on our unasked questions, untested inferences, and unshared concerns. By looking at both our left-hand column and right-hand column, we can also see how we implement our strategy. In the example above, the facilitator's strategy includes continuing an exercise she believes is futile while keeping private that she believes it is futile and what her reasoning is. When a group member raises similar concerns about the agenda, the facilitator's strategy is to again withhold her own concerns and instead inquire about whether the agenda matches what was planned, rather than whether it was useful.

**The Left-Hand Column Dilemma**

The facilitator example above illustrates a dilemma we face in difficult situations. If we do not share what is in our left-hand column, we cannot ask our questions, test our inferences, and share our concerns. However, if we do share what is in our left-hand column, we face other problems. People may rightly see that we are withholding information from them and unilaterally controlling the situation.



## **Keeping our Strategies Private**

We create this dilemma partly because we do not have productive ways of sharing difficult issues we are thinking about. This is partly a matter of technique. *But, a more fundamental reason we create this dilemma is that we think in ways that lead us to create strategies that need to be kept private in order for them to work.*

Let me give you an example. Facilitators sometimes need to give groups negative feedback on their group process. Many facilitators are familiar with the “sandwich approach” to feedback, in which negative feedback is sandwiched between positive feedback. In this approach, the facilitator begins by finding some positive things to say about group members’ performance. Next, the facilitator states some negative things, and finishes by stating some more positive things. Managers are also taught to use this feedback approach.

When I ask people why they design the feedback so that the negative feedback is placed between the positive feedback, they share the reasoning embedded in their strategy. They often say that this makes it easier for people to hear the feedback and, importantly, that people will be less likely to challenge them on the negative feedback if it is sandwiched between positive feedback. Although the positive feedback they give is usually true, its purpose is almost exclusively to buffer the negative feedback. In other words, the sandwich approach is designed partly to reduce the chance that people will express their disagreement about the negative feedback. Of course, the facilitator does not share with the group the strategy embedded in the sandwich approach.

## **The Manipulative Strategy Test**

I consider a strategy manipulative if the strategy must be kept private in order for it to work. A manipulative strategy loses its power as the strategy becomes known to those on whom it is

used. I recognize that the word *manipulative* is a strong one. I use it to highlight that when we keep our strategy private we are withholding relevant information from our clients that prevents them from understanding our reasoning, and prevents them from making a free and informed choice about how to proceed. In essence, a manipulative strategy is inconsistent with the core values of The Skilled Facilitator approach (Schwarz, 1994): valid information, free and informed choice, and internal commitment.

To determine whether a strategy is manipulative, I sometimes conduct a thought experiment. First, I imagine myself telling the group the strategy that I am using. For example, in the sandwich approach, I would imagine myself saying, "I want to give you some feedback about your process. I plan to start off with some positive feedback, place some negative feedback in the middle, and finish with some positive feedback. My strategy is that by giving you the feedback this way I will reduce the chance of your openly disagreeing with me about the negative feedback."

Second, I imagine the group's reaction, specifically the group's willingness to follow my proposed process after I have made my strategy public. In this example, I imagine that members would be considerably less willing to get feedback using a sandwich approach, having heard the strategy embedded in it. I imagine they would feel tricked to find out why I am proposing this process. I also monitor my own imaginary reaction to making the strategy public. In this example I would feel embarrassed, aware that the strategy is designed to prevent people from openly sharing a different view, which is inconsistent with what I espouse as a facilitator. Imagining myself publicly stating the strategy feels somewhat absurd; I recognize that having shared the strategy I have given away the secret and the power that goes with it. All of these imagined reactions indicate that the strategy is manipulative.



## **Moving from Private to Public Strategies**

To maintain the power of manipulative strategies we need to keep them private.

Manipulative strategies seek a group's compliance by withholding relevant information from them, thereby reducing their ability to make a free and informed choice. The more people who understand the manipulative strategy, the less effective it becomes. Consequently, if we taught a group the manipulative strategies we used for working with them, we could not use the strategies any longer to work with the group!

In contrast, strategies consistent with the core values of The Skilled Facilitator approach do not need to be kept private to keep their power. Rather, the strategies become more effective as we share them with the group and as we teach others to use them. This seems consistent with the concept of openness and authenticity that we espouse as facilitators.

In learning to make our strategies public we face several challenges. On the face of it, it seems that making our strategies public seems simply a matter of sharing what we are thinking. Yet, we are not always aware of what we are thinking. And, as we have seen above, we also recognize that some of what we are thinking is problematic to share because it is based on values and beliefs that are inconsistent with what we espouse as good facilitator values. So, we need to become aware of what our strategies are and the values and beliefs that guide them, what is known as our theory-in-use (Argyris and Schön, 1996). Then we can examine them, begin to understand how they differ from the values and beliefs we espouse, and how the values and beliefs that we use reduce our effectiveness. Then we can begin to use a set of core values and beliefs that facilitate rather than hinder our ability to make our strategies public. This essentially is the hard work of reflecting fundamentally and rigorously on our practice.

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## Author

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