Diverging Conversations through Facilitation

24 Targeted Cases

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Foreword

The benefits of co-operative thinking are widely expounded today: problems are too complex for any single discipline to solve, solutions call for creative thinking from a diversity of perspectives, and so on. These benefits are not often reached, however. Groups can be subject to competition, domination by the loudest or most powerful, disinterest by members of virtual teams who have little connection with one another, and resistance by cynical participants. At the same time, leaders may underestimate the importance of discussion in their team. Too often, creative dialogue is replaced by a quick request for “buy-in”.

In many organizations, both business and non-profit, facilitation is being discovered as a means of releasing groups to work together productively. A facilitator is a neutral figure who orchestrates a group meeting to ensure that desired objectives are accomplished. The facilitator, whether an internal figure or an external professional, puts attention on the decision-making *process*. This frees the group, and especially its leadership, to focus intently on the *content* of the decision. A facilitator is content-neutral, and thus able to draw attention to all aspects of the issue, not only the most obvious, and to assist in creating complete solutions. The facilitator provides a reminder that the organization looks to the participants for constructive input, not only passive acceptance.

This book is a compendium of experiences by many different organizations, which have successfully used (group) facilitation to reach their goals. For those who have never used facilitation, this book provides a rich diversity of case studies for how a facilitator can contribute to improved productivity and commitment. For those acquainted with facilitation, you may find new approaches here to enrich your current activities.

This book has been compiled by two members of the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) Chapter Netherlands, the professional association for facilitators. You can find more information about our activities and locate Certified Professional Facilitators (CPF) at www.iaf-world.org.

Maureen Jenkins CPF - former chair IAF World and IAF Netherlands Chapter

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Defining Facilitation

Jan Lelie CPF

Even facilitators have a hard time in defining what facilitation really is. What do we do? Is it an art, a trick, an attitude? Do we manipulate or charm a group towards results? Is there something special and unique, or is it something everybody does, just without consciously knowing? And what makes it so difficult to answer this question?

Question of leadership

To start with the latter question: facilitation itself is about emerging meaning. When we meet in a meeting, we immediately start making meaning of our situation. Where are we? What's happening to us? Who are we? What shall we do next? How to allocate resources to actions? This is so common, we don't need a facilitator. Or rather, we create a facilitator, usually called "leader". I'll come back to the connection between leadership and facilitator later. Bion[1] describes these processes. He noticed that part of what a working group does, is looking for or making a leader. Someone becoming a kind of facilitator. And this creates its own problems too.

As the presenting situation becomes too complex, we are on unknown territory. Then leadership may become part of the problem, as Bion also showed in his research. Who do you call? As Laura sketched in the previous chapter: you need a guide, calling in an external facilitator. And then, the facilitator, becoming part of the meeting, needs to make meaning too. A facilitator needs to define his or her role. Are you in need of an expert for advice? An artist for creativity? A trainer, coach? Do you need a leader, chairperson, a communicator or listener? Part of facilitation is defining the role of facilitation itself.

Definitions on offer

In the Glossary see page 133 – 143 we provide several definitions of facilitation:

- Processes or skills by which a (independent outside) party supports meeting(s) of participants to move toward improvement or resolution of a problem. Usually more than two parties are involved.
- Facilitation can operate at many levels, from providing meeting space to active intervention as a mediator, moderator, chair, coach, counselor, MC (Master of Ceremonies), manager, teacher, or trainer.

[1] W.R. Bion, Experiences in Groups: and other articles, 1968, ISBN-13: 978-0415040204

Relationships with facilitation

Jan Lelie CPF

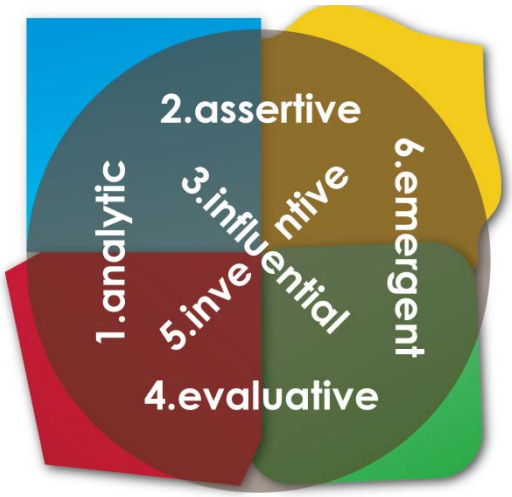
Sometimes, we're asked: "*What's the difference between a facilitator and other roles? What is the added value of a facilitator above, for example a consultant or a coach? What is the difference between the competences of a facilitator and a project manager?"* In fact, there is no sharp distinction. In this chapter we'll shed some light on the family of change agents.

Four styles, six modes

The late Will McWhinney[1] PhD developed a simple "model" based on his research into change processes. It will come as no surprise, that we constantly engage in change. From daily rituals like brushing ones teeth to extensive cultural and social changes. He provided us with a theory of change. His model is based on the observation that how **You** perceive the world, in a large extent determines your actions. You developed your world view, while adapting to circumstances and life. You didn't invent your views from scratch. The concepts of world views are of common and ancient origins. They're known as four elements, four leadership or learning styles, psychological types, spirituality's or archetypes. How you call these, is part of your world view.

McWhinney labels the four different reality perceptions as "Sensory", "Unitary", "Mythic" and "Social". I've added my four colors to them:

- **Red:** Sensory, action and concrete results oriented, i.e. fire men.
- **Blue:** Unitary, primarily interest is in rules and policies, i.e. the police.
- **Yellow:** Mythic, seeing, thinking about ideas and dreams, i.e. sun light.
- **Green:** Social, putting people, values and feelings first, i.e. Greenpeace.



Within any reality perceptions, nothing changes. A "path of change" combines at least two "realities". With four styles, we get six combinations or modes of change, and twelve directions. We can use this map to chart the different change agents' roles. For instance, a **facilitator** prefers using brainstorming. This combines feelings and notions from a group, social reality (Green), with ideas, mythic reality (Yellow) . McWhinney calls this combination the Emergent mode (6th mode in the figure).

[1] Will McWhinney, James B. Webber, Douglas M. Smith, Bernie J. Novokowsky; Creating Paths of Change: Managing Issues and Resolving Problems in Organizations, 1997, ISBN-13: 978-0761910077

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Legend to the Cases

On the next pages you can read 24 examples of facilitation. In the margin there are some small icons. These icons refer to the Red Thread, connecting the phases:

Quote from the client (“OK-sign”)
In this section the client describes what was the benefit of the facilitation for him or her.

Description of the situation (“The Knot”)
In this section the facilitator or client describes the subject matter of the case. What the current situation and what the problem is.

Question of the client (“Big Question”)
In this section the facilitator describes the question or problem, central to the meeting with the group, as agreed upon between client and facilitator or as emerged from the session.

Description of the meeting (“Meeting Circle”)
In this section the facilitator describes the meeting and his approach, the way the question and situation was handled. This section includes the method(s) or technique(s) used. What was the decisive moment? Where did the facilitator contribute?

Results of the workshop or meeting (“Pulling Together”)
In this section you can read the achieved results by the team, group, participants and how these were used by them or contributed to solutions or were carried on.

Reflection by the facilitator (“Flip Chart”)
In this last section the facilitator describes a reflection on his contribution: what or where was the difference
Made? And sometimes: what did he gained, learned from his faults, the meeting?

“The paper end-to-end test is now a standard component of a project plan”

This is what a program director had to say about the end-to-end test:

> *“Before we had this paper end-to-end test, projects regularly ran up against delays during the test phase. After we first implemented this test during the launch of a new insurance product, we calculated that we had saved approximately three months on a total project duration of 9 months. The fact that problems were eliminated prior to development led to the delivery of software on time as planned. In subsequent projects, the paper end-to-end test has proven itself time after time. It is now a standard component of a project plan.*
>
> *“The right supervisor is key to the success of a paper end-to-end test. He needs to prepare the session with the team in great and thorough detail and facilitate the session independently, whilst working together with all participants in order to succeed. You need to find somebody who is flexible, empathic and lively who knows and understands the process involved. It also needs to be someone who dares leave from the chosen path if necessary. Therefore, preferably it is someone who is not involved in the simulated process. That’s why we like to use a facilitator for this.”*

Process Simulation at the Start of a Project Saves a Large Amount of Money and Cuts Project Duration

by Henri Haarmans CPF

Communication in an IT landscape with many applications and many owners

A large insurance company has an extensive and complex IT landscape. The architecture underneath is known in the IT world as a Service Oriented Landscape (SOL). Every IT application has a specific owner responsible for establishing system requirements and demands, and the subsequent building and modification of the application.

In this case, there are more than thirty owners and many (more than 10) related applications are involved. Some examples of the applications involved are: direct debtor and creditor administrations, web based applications, technical insurance applications and output manufacturing. Communication between applications takes place via an Enterprise Service Bus (ESB), which is responsible for receiving messages (services) from one application and passing them on to another application. A Technical Application Architecture (TAA) is available for this IT-landscape. It is possible to know from the TAA which applications are connected and how, but it is not possible to infer in which sequence and what information is passed between applications.

"With the *Systemic Companionships* valid, real information emerged"

The Program Manager (PM) confesses:

> *"A Program Manager works in a complex force field. More often than not, it is difficult to identify the real nature of the issue. On the one hand, because the real problem is hidden by the participants. On the other hand, as you become part of the system, it becomes harder to consider the situation from a distance and seeing the big picture.*
>
> *"Through Jan's praxis, we could in a different way analyze the fundamental forces and search for the actual obstacles. It was as if the information emerged 'without saying,' out of the staged image. The players had information 'they could not have known.' In the follow-up I could use the insights to do highly effective interventions. Even more importantly, I could leave out interventions, which would have defaulted."*

What is Happening? The Power of Systemic Companionship

by Jan Lelie CPF

Stuck

Grid-locked on my way to the interview I search for a parking lot. The problem owner, a very experienced Program Manager (PM), and I speak an hour by phone. The PM has the job to save a particularly conflictual and stuck IT program. He is the third PM to face this issue. Everyone adheres to the common goals, but at the same time tries to protect their own interests. It is a Gordian Knot of an ambitious technical IT-program, personal, political and organizational issues. They're exceeding budget, time and other resources. The intended quality is not being achieved.

The end users have the greatest interest the program's success, but don't own the data nor pay for the system. A third party pays, employing the PM, but does not own nor use the data and the applications. The developing organization manages the data and the systems; they too deliver their own services with these data. The client has appointed the PM, my problem owner, to sort out the mess and deliver results. Fast.

They have already scheduled a large meeting with all the parties involved. He wants to identify a common, viable path to a solution, within the constraints of time and money. His request: design and facilitate this meeting.

On the face of it, it seems like a technical problem. Behind the technical solutions a struggle for power is hiding. I have a few, very long consultation meetings with the PM to decide the best approach.

Facilitation in 24 Questions

By Jan Lelie CPF

We asked facilitators which questions they get about their profession.
The most important and or frequently asked are:

1. What about facilities?
2. Where can I find a facilitator?
3. How does facilitation saves money?
4. What is the use of an intake? Why do you need one? What do you need to know?
5. How are you going to prevent that the opinion of one person is going to dominate?
6. Who is going to do the work?
7. What is new in facilitation?
8. What is the importance of facilitation?
9. Will facilitation matter in 100 years? Or is it another hype?

In this chapter we give you the answers

What about facilities?

Facilities make up the hardware of facilitation. They are the tangible assets supporting an organization, or a meeting. It is about location, room, light, tables and chairs, equipment, things, food, music, flip-charts, white boards etc.

Facilities like facilitators. Facilities make things easy too. And although facilities may look passive, they are actively used in facilitated meetings. They constitute a remarkable part in the success of a meeting. The adequate use of facilities is one of the key ingredients of tasteful facilitation. What goes where? Where do the participants stand? Where do we first meet the group? How do we route the agenda? What colors, what light, what sounds?

Facilitators like facilities. Facilitators make things easy too. Facilitators come early to the meeting: they start shifting things around. To make, create, “own”, the space. Also the timing has to be right: coffee, tea break, lunch – where is it served, how long does it take to come back? -, the break-out spaces? And off course the inevitable flip-charts and white-boards. How I love the smell of markers in the morning.

Participants like facilities. Being “greeted” by a warm, open and active space contributes to results. The impact of facilities is easily overlooked. It is usually taken for granted. This can be seen in many meeting rooms, equipped with tables in a U-shape or a rectangle with a large void in the middle. Research has shown, that this is the most ineffective way to have a meeting. Standing up speeds up your meeting by at least 100%. What’s blocking us? Fashion?, patterns?, custom?.
Never underestimate the power of habit.

Glossary of Terms in "Diverging Conversations through Facilitation"

Term	Description
Action	From Latin *actio* 'putting in motion; doing'; from *agere* 'to do'.
Active listening	A way of listening that focuses on both the content of responses in a → dialogue and the underlying emotions. It means asking open-ended questions, seeking clarification, asking for specificity, and confirming your understanding of what the other party has said.
Agenda	A structured list, plan or outline of a → meeting or → conference. The road map or game plan intended to lead to the → objectives.
Appreciative Inquiry - AI	A model for analysis and decision-making based on imagining the future state from "what works". The 4 steps are: DISCOVER: Identifying organizational processes that work well. DREAM: Envisioning what would work in the future. DESIGN: Planning what would work well. DESTINY (or DEPLOY): Implementation of the proposed design.
Autonomous	From Greek *autonomos* "having one's own laws", from *autos* 'self' (see auto-) + *nomos* 'law'. Self-government. The capacity of an individual or → group to make an informed, un-coerced decision. The central → paradox of → facilitation.
Brain facilitation	Coherent set of researched → methods, using → rooms, furniture, pictures, light, sounds, food etc. to use all faculties of the brain.
Brain Storming	A group → technique for collecting → ideas and suggestions from → participants. A three-step → method in which <u>all</u> members of a → group contribute ideas. 1. Listing subject items without challenging on a question or statement. 2. Converging the ideas by → clustering them and making them fully articulate. 3.Providing → evaluation or analysis based on criteria like relevance and impact.
Break	Time between → sessions in a → meeting. An important part of a meeting or → conference. During a break, → participants interact more freely and the opportunity should not be wasted.
Breakout Groups	Deciding to break a large → group into smaller ones, of 5 to 20 participants. The groups get the assignment to produce results with a certain → technique and within a certain time. These groups usually report back their → output to the larger group to share the results of their discussion or any → decisions made. → syndicate work.
Brown Paper Session	A visualization → method using a (very) large (brown) paper as its carrier. Sometimes standardized shapes, arrows and colors are used. See also →MetaPlan^{tm} Method → Moderation Method.