

THE FACILITATORS' VISION: THE SPIRIT FLOURISHES^[1]

Jal mein kumbh, kumbh mein jal hai, Bahar bhitar pani.

(The vessel is in water, there is water in the vessel; the water is everywhere).

—Kabir, 15th or 16th century weaver-poet-saint of Uttar Pradesh, India.

A SPIRIT BUILT CONTAINER

There is a spirit about the reality of facilitation; spirit that was born out of hope in the future and a set of beliefs in the capacity of people to make authentic choices. We facilitators enable that authenticity. Like a midwife enables the birth of a child and that child is not hers, the authenticity is not ours. Yet, if we don't act out of our own integrity we do disservice to the group's authenticity. There is a trend to institutionalize that spirit—a necessary process at some time. I don't think now is the time. I don't think the people who want to contain that spirit are the right ones to do so. (I recognize that I am not a good one to judge this.) Those who should be building the container are those who are most concerned with the spirit and not those who are concerned with the container.

—Jon Jenkins, August 3, 2005 7:08:34 AM CDT

A COMFORT WITH AMBIGUITY

Within my cross-cultural work and research I am currently looking at one of the researched cultural dimensions named uncertainty avoidance. The two ends of this dimension are uncertainty avoidance and comfort with ambiguity. Globally I am seeing at least a 10 year trend towards uncertainty avoidance and I feel the IAF certification fits this trend. And yet as facilitators and as a profession I feel we fit more in the 'comfort with ambiguity' end since we need to respond to different contexts and purposes and not be rigid.

—Barbara Pirie, August 3, 2005 3:32:28 PM CDT

THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS

The essentially democratic process of facilitation may be too complex, time-consuming, unpredictable, and expensive in this environment.

Recently the local United Way tried to launch a facilitators' academy, deploying facilitators to assist in long-range planning. The effort failed as it moved from grant-underwritten services to a fee-based arrangement, thereby competing in the entrepreneurial pool.

I believe we are at the edge of the abyss, the most risky but also most creative place to be in chaos theory. How facilitation will respond as a field will depend on our personalities and random environmental factors. It should be wild ride and I hope that this listserv sticks together for the adventure.

—Deborah Levine, August 3, 2005 7:10:49 PM CDT

A RADICAL PRACTICE

I share the perspective that facilitation is not a one magical method deal, and that we face (generally) a trend in global cultures that tend to the lowest common denominator, the easy fix, and addressing symptoms over addressing root causes. That is why I feel that facilitation, as I understand it, is a radical practice. Facilitating spaces and conversations that might empower others for purposeful participation in their lives, communities and societies is what moves me to do this work. What I love about this forum is that we connect theory and practice, that there is space and acknowledgement of deep thoughts and reflection, and the values underlying our practice.

—Alejandra Silberman, August 4, 2005 8:15:59 AM CDT

WHEN FACILITATION WORKS

When the contributors to the book, “Participation Works” gathered to reflect on what they had learned about when is the “wrong time” to use participation, four instances were cited:

1. When there is no apparent need to do things differently.
2. If the leader does not champion it.
3. When people want a quick fix to a deep problem.
4. If participation is performed around a non-issue or merely a surface issue—that is, when the focus is to “straighten something out.” Participation works best when it is addressing the core issues of a business.

—Jim Troxel, July 23, 2005 8:41:59 AM CDT

A PROBLEMATIC OBJECTIVE

If the point of group process facilitation is to help the group accomplish their work, then I would have to say that facilitation does not work when there is no proper “group work” to be done. Since designing the session, including establishing the objectives, is part of facilitation, I would say that having a problematic objective means that the facilitator blew session definition—not that facilitation won’t work in the given conditions.

When I contemplate the failed scenarios that I’ve seen or heard about, the common characteristic is that they weren’t group processes, they were sales jobs. Someone was trying to use facilitation techniques to move a group to a predetermined conclusion. If a decision has already been made, you can’t facilitate people into being happy with it.

—Mary Jackson, July 26, 2005 9:07:28 AM CDT

Notes:

1. Excerpts from [Grp-Facl](#), The electronic discussion on group facilitation: Process expertise for group effectiveness. Moderator, Sandor Schuman.
2. If the above Grp-Facl link is not automatically active in your computer environment, then cut and paste the following URL into your browser: <http://www.albany.edu/cpr/gf/> .