

# ICA

ASSOCIATES

*facilitating a culture of participation*

## **Facilitator Style** **Wayne Nelson**

The style of the facilitator is one of the key factors in establishing a participatory environment. Style goes far deeper than appearance, charisma, charm and grace. There are very real values, practices and techniques that enable people to participate in designing their own future. An effective facilitator is a living embodiment of the inherent values and principles of participation - a transparent presence that empowers the participants and enables them to get results.

### **Intentional Presence**

Each facilitator has a unique style, but can also be a chameleon; changing to be effective in each situation. A facilitator acts as a servant enabling the group to reveal its own wisdom rather than appearing as guru, dignitary or a super star. Everything a facilitator does builds toward the ultimate purpose of enabling the individuals and the group to be at their best.

Facilitators are always on stage. They dress appropriately for the group. Garish clothing and outlandish jewelry put the focus in the wrong place. Movement, posture and voice set the mood and pace. Sitting down sets a different mood than moving quickly with highly animated gestures. An enticing call to attention draws the participants together in a different mood than a barked command or a loud gavel.

Establishing a genuine connection with the participants by mixing naturally without standing out or disappearing into the group enables you to play the facilitator role without distancing yourself. Doing the homework to understand the group honours them and positions you for effectiveness.

Knowing the relevant news and current events tells them you care about them. Being prepared allows you act naturally. Observing yourself and using the ToP™ Focused Conversation method as a reflective tool can allow you to reflect on your experience. Authentic style comes from the depths. Focusing on the deepest messages you intend to communicate allows you to build your style from that foundation.

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### **Respect, Honour and Affirmation**

Mutual respect is one of the keys to genuine dialogue. Believing that all the participants have the inherent capacity to understand and respond creatively to their own situation enables a facilitator to encourage authentic self determination and self reliance.

Methods of open inquiry lead to the assumption of individual and collective responsibility. Facilitators enable people to increase their capacity to understand and interact with their world.

Facilitators assume that everyone is a source of ideas, skills and wisdom and every bit is needed. The facilitator receives all ideas as genuine contributions to the process. Respectful questions reveal deeper thinking and enable people to discover their real wisdom.

Great facilitators practice active listening. If you can repeat a person's comment as it was stated, you are on the way. Paying attention, looking at people as they speak, taking notes and following the thinking all help. Notes honour the contributor and capture the ideas for later discussions. Nothing demoralizes a group more than a facilitator who disregards people or changes their thoughts.

People who are heard, affirmed and valued participate even more creatively. Comments, gestures, body language and acts of respect that indicate acknowledgment, understanding and encouragement are highly valuable. Affirmation is only affirmation if it is clearly genuine. Play acting will be seen for what it is. Facilitators avoid any favoritism, because they are an objective presence and cautious that their affirmation does not influence the content or group dynamics. At the same time, a good facilitator enables a group to establish and respectfully maintains norms which do not allow individuals to dishonour the group with inappropriate comments and behaviour.

### **Moving Forward Together**

Most of the art and science of facilitation is focused on enabling groups to develop common understanding and a common will. The facilitator is out to enable the individual and the group to discover their insights, reach consensus and achieve their objectives.

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Assuming that the group can work together in a positive and creative way will focus you on finding ways for that to happen while emphasizing difficulties will amplify problems. Forming consensus and getting appropriate results go hand in hand. The stylistic qualities involved have to do with engaging people in a genuine dialogue over their concerns.

Start with a careful design for the whole event. An eye on the whole process allows for choices which will lead the group to what it wants to achieve. Facilitated processes are always on the move.

The facilitator needs to have a clear sense of where things are going so appropriate questions can keep the discussion moving. The ToP method itself is the best tool to mediate disputes and clarify misunderstandings. Taking a moment to clarify or resolve things will enable the whole group to move together.

Dialogue begins with ideas. All the ideas need to get into the mix and the group needs to understand them. No judging or arguing are necessary or helpful at this point. The style is eliciting, evoking and generating. A long list of ideas is just a long list of ideas and pretty easy to come by. Unprocessed thoughts become orphans. You can clarify and examine them, group them into similar clusters revealing relationships and patterns of thought.

This is where the sap starts running. The style is a balance of high play and a deeply earnest search for meaning. Patterns get named and reality takes on a new cast. The group generates new knowledge, creates meaning and significance and as it does so it constructs a common understanding of its world. You midwife a new constellation of reality.

### **Facilitator as Orchestrator**

In a mythological sense, a facilitator is orchestrating "cosmic energies." The Indian mythological epic Mahabharata depicts a war among the gods. Primal life energies assume the form of Gods, Goddesses, people and animals. The real world of the late 20th century is not nearly so clear.

These forces do not wear tee shirts with emblems like "good" and "evil" emblazoned on them like cosmic hockey teams. They show up as a multiplicity of subtle energies that interact in a blending and balancing dance or jazz that can range from deeply harmonious to shockingly discordant. William Irwin Thompson calls genuine dialogue "mind jazz."

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The style of the facilitator is more like a symphony conductor than a referee. All of the instruments play their own part in a very large and complex score that is written as it is played. The facilitator orchestrates the composition of the score as well as the performance and they all take place at the same time.