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facilitating a culture of participation

Magic of the Facilitator

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The lineaments of a new intellectual and practical discipline is brewing that, as yet, cannot be found in any university or college course. Lurking in this fermenting pot of human-to-human relations is, as one devotee put it, 'what every newly elected politician needs training in before taking office.'

Competence n. (also competency): being competent, ability

Thirty years of ICA research and training have generated a band of facilitator-consultants around the world who are second to none in their grasp and practice of the dynamics and "how-to's" of the art and science of group facilitation. In many nations round the world, these practitioners have laboured for years facilitating community consultations in the developing nations, assisting major corporations and other organizations to work cooperatively to solve problems, and then trained others in the same art and science.

These graduates of ICA training have now teamed up with representatives from other traditions of consultation to create a bold new organization, The International Association of Facilitators (IAF). Among other items on the IAF's agenda is a statement on the specific Competences involved in participative facilitation. So far, members have listed Competences gleaned from their own training and experience, facilitator groups in different locations have forged out their own skill listings, and all these have been amalgamated with the ability charts of other facilitation traditions. The end product will be a statement of the multifarious abilities needed by a facilitator. This will give both ICA and the IAF a platform from which to evaluate where trainee facilitators are on the journey toward facilitation mastery. A big picture is beginning to emerge from this mass of data that is far more than a dry list of what facilitators have "gotta be able to do." What is actually lurking in the preliminary gestalt is a prescription for creating a culture of participation, the lineaments of an emerging new discipline, a paradigm for human-to human relations, and, possibly, as one devotee put it, "what every newly elected politician needs training in before taking office."

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Competence #1. On Top of the Methods

The Facilitator Is Effective in Using the Core Methods

The facilitator is competent in designing and leading larger or smaller group processes and events: a conversation or discussion, a meeting, a workshop, a design conference, an environmental review, a strategic planning session or a macro program of consultation. With this comes a complete familiarity with the process of creating and sequencing questions that move the group from surface considerations into the depth implications of any topic. Underneath this again is the capacity to distinguish process from content, and the discernment to decide which bracket of methods best fits the client's needs. Beyond simply knowing the steps of the methods, the facilitator has a profound comprehension of the underlying framework of facilitation through which the difference between mere technique and underlying method is made obvious. As a result, the facilitator is free to flex in the face of new emerging possibilities

Competence # 2. Able to Deliver on the Deal

The Facilitator Carefully Manages the Client Relationship and Prepares Thoroughly

The facilitator has to be able to care in depth for the client organization. This involves knowing how to customize programs to fit the client's situation, and how to close a deal and deliver on the contract. It also presumes the courage to say no to a deal if facilitation is not an appropriate solution or will not work.. It means preparing every aspect of the program ahead of time. Especially important is getting crystal clear on the specific intents for the event—both rational and experiential—and designing the components of the event that will realize those intents. Along with these, is the setting of realistic time allotments for each part of the program, developing the key questions the group will wrestle with, thoroughly researching the client's situation and needs, and taking special care in the strategic selection of the event space.

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Competence #3. Both Janitor and Metronome

The Facilitator Uses Time and Space Intentionally

It is not enough to merely select a good space for the group event. The facilitator has to know how to create the event environment. If the janitor has not cleaned the space up, the facilitator has to do it, and, at break times, keep on doing it to ensure the environment remains the ally of the event. It is important to know how to best arrange the space so that it works for both the process and the group.

This means checking out the space ahead of time and making sure there is a large wall to hold the data; it means arranging the tables and chairs to communicate intentionality and maximize face to face participation; it also means a skilful use of decor tuned to the nature of the event and communicating its significance.

Similarly for time: the facilitator has to be the metronome for the group, sensing the rhythm that is most enlivening at the particular time of day; pacing the activities so as to capitalize on the “beat” of the group; apportioning the time available so as to get the job done and reach timely closure. The facilitator has to also know how to punctuate the time to release tension whether through the use of humour, or through ‘stretch breaks’, or even great music—whatever it takes to keep releasing the group. Finally, the facilitator knows the importance of letting the whole group own the time and the task so that they can make the decisions.

Competence #4. The Evocateur:

The Facilitator Is Skilful in Evoking Participation and Creativity

More than a “methodologist”, the facilitator also has to be an evocateur; has to have an unshakable belief that the group itself has the wisdom and creativity needed to deal with the situation. What is involved here is the ability to create a climate of participation. The facilitator has to know how to elicit the latent wisdom in the group by catalysing everyone’s participation, and involving the whole group in taking responsibility for its own decisions. The ability to create a group climate conducive to both participation and creativity has to be a critical art up every facilitator’s sleeve.

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Eliciting the wisdom of the group is the name of the game. It is here that the facilitator's magic is most needed. Objective skills here involve the setting of an enabling context that corrals and focuses the group's insights toward a specific topic and a focus question. Then the facilitator has to be able to elicit the group's best responses to the question which involves appealing to imagination, and encouraging some boldness and even wildness in the responses. This involves giving individuals time to write down their own answers, so that people who think a little more slowly, but possibly more surely, than others, have time to marshal their input. Then the facilitator has to be able to get all the group's data out through an inclusive brainstorm. Here maximizing participation is of the essence. The leader has to involve the whole group, find ways to draw out the quieter folk, and push each one in the group to play an active role in the organizing the data into bitable chunks, and naming it.

Competence #5. Affirmation on the Hoof

The Facilitator Is Practiced in Honouring the Group and Affirming Its Wisdom

Appropriating the diversity of a group as a gift is more than a skill, and much more than what is involved in the facile "I'm-OK-you're-OK" It stems not only from methodological necessity but from a deep recognition of the wonder of life and the implicit wisdom and greatness of each human being. This involves a foundational stance of affirmation, the constant decision to reference situations positively, and the habit of responding with the 'yes' before the 'no'. The facilitator is aware that the method works best when he is able to affirm the wisdom of each person, honour the collective data of the whole group, celebrate the completed work of the group, and at the same time affirm each person in the group individually.

This is not an abstraction. In practice it entails the ability and readiness to listen to participants' actual words, to accept silence with understanding, to maintain accepting eye contact with the speaker and to note down the individual's insights verbatim. It also entails the willingness to focus on what the individual is saying rather than what the facilitator is going to say next. The other side of honouring what the participant is saying is the readiness to push occasional answers for clarity, so that the participant's real insight is revealed.

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Competence #6. Under the Neutral Flag

The Facilitator Is Capable of Maintaining Objectivity

A key role of the facilitator is to provide objectivity to the group process. One side of the facilitator is more like an orchestra conductor who wants a first-class product, but the other side is more like the dispassionate referee who knows the importance of maintaining a neutral stance toward what is coming out of the group. To this end, the facilitator has to be able to set aside personal opinions on the data of the group, to be careful not to react negatively to people's insights, and to maintain detachment from the group-generated data. In the same universe is the capacity to buffer criticism, anger and frustration with a non-defensive stance when the group energy overheats.

Competence #7. Antennae Up

The Facilitator Is Skilled in Reading the Underlying Dynamics in the Group

The facilitator is practiced in sensing dynamics in the group. (In particular, the facilitator has to be versed in interpreting the silence of the group, identifying 'axes' and hidden agenda, and not only sensing the group's uncertainty at particular points but taking steps to clarify it.

Deft at picking up non-verbal cues, the facilitator can also listen to the group with 'the third ear' to pick up the significance of what lies behind participants' words. On the more active side, the facilitator is facile in pushing negatively phrased data for its underlying insight and to probe vague answers for their fuller meaning.

Competence #8. The Orchestrator

The Facilitator Is Deft at Orchestrating the Event Drama

Paramount to engaging the group's commitment to the process is the development of audience rapport. The facilitator has to be able to engage this rapport from the start, creating icebreakers that loosen a group up. Then, as a group goes through its alternating ups and downs of mood, the facilitator has to be inventive in shifting time and mood intentionally to get the job done, savvy in using personal illustrations to release the group, and sagacious in using humour catalytically.

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Along with these talents, go the sensitivity to know when the group needs a break, when the pace needs to be changed, when the process has reached a critical point that needs signifying, and when to allow the group to struggle if necessary in order to reach the breakthrough point.

Competence #9. The Drano Function

The Facilitator Can Creatively Release Blocks to the Process

At the same time, facilitator must have creative ways to release blocks to the process. This demands a light touch to gently discourage side conversations. It calls for shrewd tactics to discourage speechifying and argumentation, and demands tactful ways to discourage the dominance of particular individuals, to handle 'difficult' people and to deal helpfully with conflict. If need be, the facilitator is quite capable of apologizing publicly if the needs of the group demand it, and do anything necessary to keep the process moving forward. In thorny situations, the facilitator is able to bring difficult decisions back to the group so that it can take responsibility for its own process.

Competence #10. A Highwire Balancing Act

The Facilitator Is Adroit in Adapting to the Changing Situation

Facilitation involves a balancing act on the highwire. Ancillary to all the skills so far described is the capacity of the facilitator to flex with the changing situation. The facilitator has to know how to balance the process on the one hand and the results of the process on the other; and to harmonize the needs of the participants at any one moment with the total demands of the task.

This is based on the foundational understanding that the process for arriving at the results is just as important as the results themselves. In addition, a certain mental nimbleness is mandatory: when the unexpected happens, the ability to think and make decisions on the fly, to use the methods flexibly, and, very occasionally, to fly by the site of one's pants can make the difference between success and failure.

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Competence #11. Big Shoulders

The Facilitator Assumes Responsibility for the Group Journey

Facilitating a process for an organization is much, much more than using a bag of tricks to occupy the audience for a day or two. The facilitator must have the maturity to assume responsibility not only for the process, but also for the overall task, the participants and the outcome of the event. This assumes the willingness to take on a big load, to take responsibility for every single aspect of the program, to deal successfully with ambiguity, use one's critical intelligence to make hard decisions and then to take the consequences of those decisions. This assumes a solid personal discipline and a strong spiritual base.

Competence #12. Hard Copy

The Facilitator Can Produce Powerful Documentation

Coming up with a finessed group product—a documentary record of the group's insights—is the bottom line of facilitation. With the help of an assigned documenter who inputs the group data in tandem with the process, the participants can be handed a hard-copy product before they leave. Vital to this is the ability to keep track of all the group-generated data and enough versatility in using computer programs to produce the data holding charts. Making a powerful verbal report to the client that captures the significance and implications of the program, and, in certain situations, and having the courage to protect the group's conclusions, (especially the more controversial decisions) are not insignificant attributes of the facilitator.

Competence #13: Group Role Model

The Facilitator Demonstrates Professionalism, Self-Confidence and Authenticity

The development of a professional self-image, self-confidence, and an intentional style and dress is an important asset of the facilitator. Even more important is the willingness to play the role of a model of authenticity for the group. The facilitator can also take on whatever role the group requires to provide a walking image of authentic selfhood in the midst of practical tasks.

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Whether working alone, or co-facilitating with a diverse facilitation team, the facilitator can be serious, probing the depths of unknown puzzles, or can be glad-handed, setting at ease those reluctant to participate; or distant, causing the group to reflect on its own insights, or close, sharing learning in ways that illuminate the present situation of participants. With nothing to win or lose, and able to transcend personal neuroses, the facilitator is totally free to do what's required by the situation to disclose authentic human potential. Above all the facilitation practitioner takes care to walk the facilitator's talk. While rejoicing in the successes of the group and giving the appearance of having a great time, the facilitator speaks only from experience, preferring to remain silent rather than give "good advice" that is not grounded in personal experience.

Competence #14: The Iron Pillar of Freedom

The Facilitator Maintains Personal Integrity

Finally, the facilitator knows the secret of maintaining personal integrity; has learned how to authentically process and relate to rejection, hostility and suspicion; how to let go of any personal pain arising from a program; and how to take care of personal renewal for the sake of the next client situation.