The Zen of Facilitation

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The belief system of a facilitator is presented to clarify the distinction between trainers and facilitators.

Staff developers are assuming new roles and responsibilities as facilitators. In this capacity, they use behaviors, skills, and practices which they did not use as frequently as a trainer. To be successful in this new role, staff developers will need to go beyond the application of new skills, knowledge, and practices—they will need to adopt the belief system of facilitators. In this article, we distinguish between training and facilitation, examine the belief system of a facilitator, and share a process for moving from the familiar mind set of the trainer to the zen of facilitation.

Distinction between Training and Facilitation

Learning how to facilitate groups rather than train people was new for us. As staff development trainers for a school district, we found ourselves on a journey from training to facilitation that required us to expand our skills, learn new strategies, and adopt new beliefs. We constantly asked ourselves what actually differentiated facilitation from training.

Initially our work with facilitation seemed to be no different than training. We found that the skills and strategies which we had learned about facilitation fit nicely into our training work. For example, we implemented team-building strategies, which we learned in facilitation workshops, to create a community of learners in our training sessions.

In many respects the line between training and facilitation seemed to be a fine one. However, as we became more experienced as facilitators, the differences between training and facilitation became clearer to us. We offer one view of these differences to help frame our discussion about the zen of facilitation.

Training

Training involves moving from the known to the known. It is focused by a set of specific outcomes or objectives established prior to the training. It focuses on a specific set of skills or knowledge that can be applied in the workplace. When designing and delivering training, a trainer determines clear

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outcomes and establishes a plan of action to achieve those outcomes with learners. Both the outcomes and the steps to achieve those outcomes are determined before training begins.

The trainer designs a tightly structured, sequential set of learning experiences to direct participants to achieve the outcomes in the timeframe prescribed. Based on a diagnosis of the participants, an understanding of their needs, and a set of desired outcomes of the training, the trainer develops a specific plan for moving toward these outcomes. For example, a trainer who is teaching cooperative learning to a group of high school teachers will develop a plan to teach the critical elements of cooperative learning and the skills that will enable teachers to apply cooperative learning in their various content areas.

Facilitation

Facilitation involves moving from the known to the unknown. A facilitator begins with information regarding the situation or the problem and the participants; however, the outcome or resolution is not set when the facilitator begins. The design and plan of action as well as the outcome emerge as the group works on the situation or problem. Facilitation requires orchestration of meaningful interactions which lead to changes in mindset (Oakley & Krug, 1992). Meaningful interaction is an open, honest discussion in a safe and respectful setting. This interaction can lead to problem solving, decision making, conflict resolution, and task accomplishment.

While learning may be a by-product of facilitation, it is not its primary goal. Facilitators choose from among various strategies and tools as the interaction evolves. The facilitator creates a nurturing environment for individuals to achieve whatever they are comfortable achieving in an undefined timeframe.

Distinctions

In essence, training involves using a set of *priori* (beforehand) plans, while facilitation involves applying a set of decisions made *in media res* (in the middle of things; during the process).

We acknowledge that trainers make decisions *in media res* to adjust their delivery; however, they operate from a pre-established plan that directs participants toward the achievement of specified out-

comes. On the other hand, facilitation decisions are made spontaneously and are driven by the nature of the interaction rather than by a set of specified outcomes.

Some of the distinctions between training and facilitation which we have identified from our experiences are listed in Figure 1. However, we recognize that the line between training and facilitation is not definitive. We have discovered that it is not what we do or how we do it that separates a trainer from a facilitator. Rather, it is the belief system driving the actions that makes the difference (Wing, 1986).

Zen of Facilitation

Zen is the practice of seeking the truth. Buddhists, who practice zen, seek enlightenment through direct intuition and reflection (Reps, n.d.). The zen of facilitation is not a religious practice, but rather a strong set of beliefs that drives our choices and actions and urges us toward discovering the "truth" through reflection. "It [Zen] has been described as: 'A special teaching without scriptures, beyond words and letters, pointing to the mind-essence of man, seeing directly into one's nature, attaining enlightenment.'" (Reps, n.d., p.3)

From our experiences, we have discovered that the beliefs we hold about our work are powerful and affect the actions we take. Our beliefs determine how we act as well as how we make sense of the experiences we have (Senge, 1990). We have identified three essential beliefs which influence our choices and actions as facilitators.

Belief 1: Facilitators trust the group's ability to find its own direction and resolution.

To be successful in this new role, staff developers will need to go beyond the application of new skills, knowledge, and practices-- they will need to adopt the belief system of facilitators.

"Remember that you are facilitating another person's process. It is not your process. Do not intrude. Do not control. Do not force your own needs and insights into the foreground. If you do not trust a person's process, that person will not trust you." (Heider, 1985, p.33)

A facilitator believes that the group establishes its own purpose and is capable of achieving its own outcome. In every situation, the facilitator believes the solution is possible any time before, during, or after an event. The facilitator assumes the group's perspective rather than maintaining his or her own.

By listening to the group's discussion and particularly to the language used, the facilitator discovers both the surface and underlying issues in the group. Only after the issues are clarified does the facilitator make decisions about how to resolve the issues.

Using a variety of strategies, the facilitator guides the group in examining the issues, generating alternatives, and selecting a course

Figure 1
Distinctions Between
Trainers and Facilitators

Trainers	Facilitators
1 Give information and skill	1 Provide nurturance
2 Direct learning	2 Guide interaction
3 Operate from specified outcomes	3 Operate from an overarching goal and a vision of possibilities
4 Have an established timeframe	4 Have an undetermined timeframe
5 Plan the sequence to achieve the outcomes	5 Have a repertoire to draw from, but no predetermined plan
6 Are cognitive	6 Are intuitive
7 Use an *a priori* design	7 Use an *in media res* design
8 Move from known to known	8 Move from unknown to known

> **Asking questions and listening are the primary functions of an effective facilitator. These replace giving answers, assuming the group's needs, or providing solutions.**

of action appropriate for this particular group at this time. Believing that the group has its own best solution and that it will emerge at the best time, the facilitator supports the interactions that lead the group to discover that solution.

When facilitators live by this belief, they do two things:

• *Ask questions and listen*. Asking questions and listening are the primary functions of an effective facilitator. These replace giving answers, assuming the group's needs, or providing solutions.

• *Recognize that when it's time, it's time*. All issues can be resolved if the time and conditions are right. Similarly, change occurs when the time and conditions are right. For example, when the climatic conditions of temperature, moisture, and barometric pressure are right, thunderstorms occur.

In facilitation, there are both external and internal conditions that affect the movement of the group towards its goal. When group participants reach a level of understanding, acceptance, and openness, resolution occurs.

The facilitator strives to create and/or

> **When the facilitator models the productive behaviors of respectful listening, maintaining personal safety, honoring various perspectives, sharing, trusting, risk-taking, and disclosing, then group members will mirror these behaviors.**

adjust the conditions for the group to be successful. Sometimes this means structuring communication systems or permitting adequate time for the group to establish the conditions. It might also mean acting as a catalyst to alter the conditions by speaking the unspoken, offering suggestions, or hypothesizing about the reasons for the group's behavior.

Belief 2: A sense of community creates a forum for group work.

"*Community is a group of people who have learned to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to 'rejoice together,' and to 'delight in each other, make others' conditions our own'...*" (Peck, 1987, p. 59)

"*Once a group has achieved community, the single most common thing members express is: 'I feel safe here.'*" (Peck, 1987, p. 67)

A facilitator believes that a community provides a forum for meaningful interaction, which in turn leads the group to its own solutions. When facilitators live by this belief, they do five things.

• *Model attitudes and behavior*. Group members' attitudes and behaviors are strongly influenced by the facilitator's attitudes and behaviors. When the facilitator models the productive behaviors of respectful listening, maintaining personal safety, honoring various perspectives, sharing, trusting, risk-taking, and disclosing, then group members will mirror these behaviors. Through this process, a nurturing environment emerges.

• *Reveal their thinking*. Facilitators further the development of community by revealing their observations about behaviors within the group. The facilitator may also offer possible reasons for these behaviors, discuss potential interventions and the reasons for them, or suggest various strategies.

• *Foster independence*. Building the group's independence is another way the facilitator furthers community. This is accomplished by providing opportunities for all group members to be leaders, thus equalizing everyone's sense of power. In essence, the facilitator is responsible for helping group members develop comfort with one another so that meaningful interaction occurs.

• *Stay in the here and now*. The facilitator needs to stay in the present in order to focus clearly on what is occurring in the group. The past and future do not exist for

the facilitator. The only information or interaction that matters is what is current.

• *Trust their intuition*. Facilitators operate not so much from knowledge of "how to" but more from "gut feelings." This is particularly difficult for facilitators who feel more comfortable with specific plans, clear directions, and precise outcomes. Facilitators develop a "seat-of-the-pants" feel for what is happening and what needs to happen next. That feeling will be blocked if facilitators are not in tune with their "knowing place."

Belief 3: The facilitator has no preconceived notions.

"*When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be. When I let go of what I have, I receive what I need... My best work is done when I forget my own point of view; the less I make of myself, the more I am... This is the wisdom...: let go in order to achieve.*" (Heider, 1985, p.43)

Facilitators believe that groups will generate their own best solutions. Facilitators give up the need to be right and to heal, convert, solve, or fix the group. Facilitators take a backseat to the process and allow the group to drive itself. This behavior is antithetical to the trainer's role of directing the group toward specific outcomes.

Facilitators need to let go of preconceived notions about how "it" should be and allow the group to shape its own future. To do this, the facilitator has to be flexible, egoless, and confident of the power in the group.

When facilitators live by this belief, they do three things:

• *Go slowly to go fast*. In any situation it is necessary to go slowly to build relationships, a common knowledge base, awareness of other viewpoints, and an understanding of one another before any tasks can be accomplished. To rush into a complex situation and resolve it quickly is like putting a band-aid on a crack in a dam. According to Kouzes and Posner (1990), "There are two ways to bring about change: you can force it or you can let it happen naturally. The former is faster but it increases resistance... The latter is slower but it tends to receive greater acceptance" (p. 236). Facilitators recognize the importance of letting go of time constraints. Spending time up front to establish well-grounded relationships will ensure efficient work later.

• *Use the energy*. Facilitators need to recognize the energy in group settings. We

typically are more comfortable with those members who are overtly positive and supportive. However, negative energy is a symptom that deeper, sometimes more significant issues are not being faced. If these issues are not addressed, they may sabotage resolution attempts.

Facilitators often avoid the negative energy in a group out of fear. Letting go of the fear associated with negative individuals or issues, acknowledging those issues, and appreciating the underlying negative energy frees facilitators to listen more carefully and use the negative energy as a valuable energy source for moving a group forward.

• *If unsure what to do, do nothing.* The facilitator needs to be comfortable with not taking action. Whenever the facilitator is unsure about what to do, he or she should choose to do nothing. By not intervening, the group is provided with an opportunity to determine its own next step or to provide additional information which will clarify what the facilitator's choice should be. While choosing to do nothing is often difficult, it can be a powerful intervention.

Recommendations for Learning Facilitation

Acquiring the skills, practices, and beliefs of an effective facilitator is a process of evolution and internalization. We find the following example of internalization from science particularly illustrative:

> *"Suppose, for example, that we deposit a drop of black ink into a glass of clear water. Initially its presence is quite ordered. That is, all the molecules of ink are located in one small area and are clearly segregated from the molecules of water. As time passes, however, natural molecular motion will cause the black ink molecules to steadily intersperse with the clear water molecules until they are distributed evenly throughout the glass, resulting in a murky homogeneous liquid with no structure or order whatsoever..."* (Zukav, 1979, p. 221)

For us, internalization means a change of focus from theories and techniques to the wholeness of the process. There are three stages in this evolution: learning, engaging, and reflection. Initial learning is the result of training in the concepts, skills, strategies, and techniques of facilitation.

Armed with these tools, facilitators move next into real-world application. When en-

gaged with groups, facilitators may feel overwhelmed by all that is happening. Facilitators seek to make the "right" choice from among options. At this stage facilitators often face uncertainty and self-doubt. Facilitators might be haunted by questions such as "Did I make the right choice? What if I had...?"

Eventually this unsettled state is resolved when facilitators fully adopt the zen of facilitation. Through reflection, questioning, and discussion with other facilitators, the underlying beliefs are crystallized. The role and responsibilities becomes less frightening as facilitators move from conscious decision making to trusting the underlying beliefs to guide decisions. The facilitator begins to see the murky liquid rather than the ink and water. As Heider (1985) observes,

"Beginners acquire new theories and techniques until their minds are cluttered with options. Advanced students forgot their many options. They allow the theories and techniques that they have learned to recede into the background." (p. 95)

We have learned that facilitation is not easy and that it requires tremendous dedication to practice and reflection, is not learned quickly, is continually humbling, and is fascinating. For staff developers beginning the journey from training to facilitation, we believe the critical component of success is the understanding of the zen of facilitation.

If we have learned one thing on our journey, it is that the tools or techniques alone are insufficient for long-term effectiveness. Facilitators must go beyond knowledge and strategies to seek truth and enlightenment that come only from practice, reflection, and following their beliefs.

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