Compassion: A Core Value of Skilled Facilitation - Insights from *The Skilled Facilitator*

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"The same kind of thinking that leads you to act ineffectively as a facilitator also leads group members to act ineffectively. Like you, the group members are probably unaware of how they create these problems for themselves." – Roger Schwarz

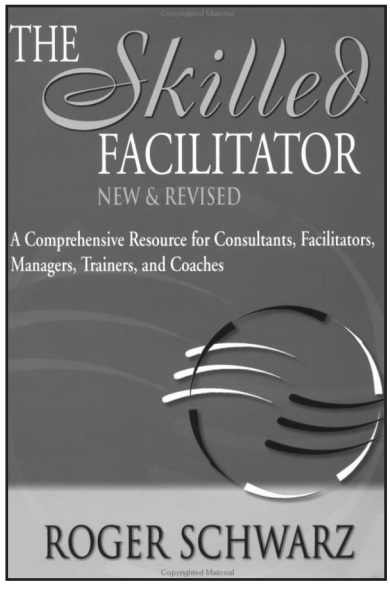
Compassion? Yes, that's what Roger Schwarz's revised second edition of *The Skilled Facilitator* suggests as one of the four core values of the "skilled facilitator approach." This four-hundred-page book from Jossey Bass is a text that is not only incredibly dense, but also amazingly useful for "getting at" the complexity of facilitation.

While I will not attempt to give a thorough description of what this text contains, I will highlight several ideas that have been helpful for the work of our own professional development team in Salt Lake and for me personally.

The Skilled Facilitator Approach

Schwarz defines skilled facilitation as an approach "based on a theory of group facilitation that contains a set of core values and principles and a number of techniques and methods derived from the core values and principles. It integrates theory into practice to create a values-based, systemic approach to group facilitation." Schwarz's definition articulates the advantage of his book, which is using core values and principles to derive methods and techniques. Unlike many books about facilitation that collect and dispense a kind of "technical expertise," Schwarz challenges us to make our behavior congruent with a theory of action called the mutual learning model.

Compassion is the first of four core values. The others are 2) valid information, 3) free and informed choice, and 4) internal commitment to the choice. From the skilled facilitator perspective, compassion is the ability to have empathy for others and yourself in a way that holds everyone accountable for their own actions. As three key elements of compassion, Schwarz defines a set of behaviors which, when missing from our interactions, often get in the way of doing good work with each other. These intentional actions are: 1) suspending judgment; 2) expressing concern for others' and one's own good; and 3) appreciating others' and one's own suffering. By suffering Schwarz means the emotional pain that we all feel when our needs are not met or when we confront or experience change.



The core value of valid information describes a set of behaviors that help a group become more effective. First members share with each other all relevant information and are open to making clear their reasoning for considering this particular information relevant to a decision. Members also share information that can be independently validated and intentionally consider new information, as it becomes available. The underlying assumption here is that we need the best possible information to make the best decisions.

The third core value, which is based on the principle of valid information, is free and informed choice. The freedom aspect of choice challenges each of us, especially the facilitator, to examine our own patterns of interactions and emotional reactions, identifying our own tendencies to coercion or manipulation. How do we set the tone with integrity in our work with groups and with each other so that emotional reactivity does not take over the group process? One strategy is that members of the learning community actually define their own objectives as well as the methods for achieving them. Jane Vella, in her seminal book on adult learning, defines this principle as adults being valued as the subject of their own learning. Vella quotes Freire, writing: "Only the student can name the death of the teacher." In other words as a facilitator, especially when we are building the capacity of organizations to be learning communities, our primary goal is to ensure that members in the group begin to facilitate their own work.

The fourth core value is internal commitment to the choice. This value is often at the heart of any kind of "reform" initiative. Often people label this experience as "ownership" or "buy-in." I have always found this way of speaking about motivation to be personally unsatisfying. Schwarz, on the other hand, describes commitment as feeling personally responsible for the choice made and the consequences. We are committed to the decision or action because it is compelling and intrinsically valuable. There is not an external reward or penalty for making the choice. As a result, people actually follow through with what they have chosen without external monitoring.

Other Caveats

Schwarz presents a wide range of knotty issues in a clear and, often, dense way. Schwarz's underlying belief is that facilitation is valuable in multiple roles: 1) consultant, 2) coach, 3) trainer, and 4) leader. He handles group dynamics in the section about diagnosing behavior in groups. His work, however, stands out because he challenges us to investigate and make

(continued on page 15)

Compassion...

(continued from page 6)

public our inferences as members of groups. In another section he addresses intervening in groups and articulates clearly the ways in which group members can express emotions so that it increases the effectiveness of the group's work. This section had great appeal to me personally because emotional energy is so powerful and has so much potential for creating conditions for doing great work with a group. The stickler is that power, as defined by Ken McLeod in *Wake-Up to Your Life*, is the ability to be present in intentional action. This is why facilitation is both cognitively and emotionally demanding.

So What? Now What?

The biggest challenge for each of us as coaches, facilitators, and human beings is to act congruently with our espoused core values.

Here are two other sets of core values that Schwarz describes as a contrast to the Mutual Learning Model that he espouses.

Set One:

1. Achieve your goals.
2. Maximize winning and minimize loss.
3. Minimize generating or expressing negative feelings.
4. Act according to what you consider rational.

Underlying assumptions: I understand the situation. I have pure motives. My negative feelings are justified.

Set Two:

1. Everyone participates in defining the purpose.
2. Everyone wins and no one loses.
3. Express your feelings.
4. Suppress your intellectual reasoning.

Underlying assumptions: In order for people to learn, be involved and committed, people must come to the right answer by themselves. The group does not want my help, but I have the right answer.

Before going to your next facilitation experience, use Schwarz's conceptual framework and inquire into your own core values and the assumptions that underlie them. Is there a connection between your "talk" and your "walk"? This is a recurrent question that must be posed as our groups and our work evolve. ■

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Because of the Kids...

(continued from page 5)

when Jennifer decides to publish her work in the study, her dissertation, as part of her plans to enter academia and Karen tries to block Jennifer's plans. Karen begins the exchange by demanding a co-authoring credit and the kid gloves get dropped. Jennifer's feelings of risk and pain as she's being threatened by Karen are devastating.

"I was being encouraged by my professors to publish my dissertation as a natural aspect of making myself marketable for the profession … Karen felt disillusioned by my actions and her hurt led to her being a threat to the publication of my dissertation (p. 74)."

As I read this part of the book, I found myself wondering about the risks that colleagues of color take each time they form professional and personal relationships with white colleagues like me …

However, just when it looks like a legal battle is about to heat up between the two women, Karen apologizes and the collaboration continues.

Later, with the help of an interview with Lisa Delpit, both teachers are able to understand the role of their cultural differences in the ways they define conflict and either embrace or avoid it. Here's a sample of Lisa Delpit's analysis:

"And in your case Jennifer…you expect, if somebody has something on their mind, they bring it up…And that was one of the things that I think caused you all some conflict, because you're expecting if something's on Karen's mind, Karen's gonna say it. (p. 84)"

Meanwhile, Karen believed, according to her remarks to Lisa Delpit, that a good relationship was "one with no conflict (p. 84)."

Throughout the text the implications of the lessons the teachers learn about communication, assumptions, and their impact on adult and student interaction are clearly described and should be of real value for all teachers concerned with closing the achievement gap in our classrooms and schools. But the broader value of this study lies in its lessons for anyone interested in the ways we negotiate relationships across the persistent racial divide that hobbles our progress as teachers. The experience chronicled by these two educators addresses a gap in the current literature about the multilayered impact of race on teaching and learning in diverse classrooms. I applaud the honesty, courage, and persistence of these authors and I think their explicit conversations about things usually left unsaid, out there "on the skinny branches," offer many lessons for those of us working in Critical Friends Groups. ■

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