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” 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.

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)

Barbie, Kim and Joe were invaluable to the NSRF staff at the Winter Meeting. The NSRF staff thanks them for their hard work, commitment and dedication to making the Winter Meeting a success!
The Vermont Center of Activity has been piloting a format for doing “fishbowl” protocols that we would like to share. A fishbowl is an arrangement where a larger group of participants is broken into an inner and outer circle with the inner circle actively participating in the protocol and the outer providing feedback. The fishbowl can be used with any of the NSRF protocols.

The Partner Fishbowl is a variation of this method that we have found to get all participants to be more active in the protocol, to provide a higher level of safety for the presenter and participants, to be an excellent way to introduce the use of protocols and to be effective for pushing the conversation deeper during protocols.

How does it work? As the name implies, everyone participating in the protocol – presenter, facilitator, and participants – is paired with a partner. Each pair has one member sitting in the inner circle and one member sitting in the outer circle at any given time; each participant pair decides which of them will start where (though the presenter and the facilitator will necessarily be in the inner circle). During the protocol, the facilitator stops the conversation at certain points and has the partners consult with each other. Pairs can switch circles during these stopping points if they so desire. We have found the partner fishbowl to work well with both beginning groups who are using the protocols for the first time, and for experienced groups hoping to push the conversation deeper.

Partner Fishbowl for Groups New to Protocols

With new groups, the aim of the partner fishbowl is to familiarize the group with the protocol and to allow reflection on how to effectively engage in the protocol. During the protocol, the facilitator, who should be an experienced CFG member, stops the protocol at each major conversation transition and asks the presenter and participants to together prepare things such as probing questions, responses to describing student work rounds, or points to be made in a conversation.

Only the person sitting in the inner circle is part of the conversation when the protocol recommences, but the time with the partner helps beginners to figure out what is appropriate and effective to say during a protocol.

Another advantage of the partner fishbowl is that the facilitator can get support, preferably from an experienced CFG member, when the protocol recommences.

Partner Fishbowl for Experienced Groups

With new groups, the aim of the partner fishbowl is to familiarize the group with the protocol and to allow reflection on how to effectively engage in the protocol. During the protocol, the facilitator, who should be an experienced CFG member, stops the protocol at each major conversation transition and asks the presenter and participants to together prepare things such as probing questions, responses to describing student work rounds, or points to be made in a conversation.

The facilitator’s partner should help the facilitator make decisions about how to lead the protocol with an emphasis on getting to the harder questions. The role of the presenter’s partner is critical in experienced groups because pushing the conversation deeper involves a greater risk for the presenter. The partner gives the presenter, through frequent check-ups about comfort level and learnings, the necessary support so that participants can push harder. Another advantage of a partner for the presenter is that it allows the facilitator to concentrate his/her efforts on deepening the conversation as the presenter’s needs are met by someone else. In my experience as a facilitator, being relieved of the duty of assuring the comfort of the presenter has helped me to lead protocols more effectively.

We hope you will try out this way to structure protocols and we would love to hear about other uses friends find it for.

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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 kids 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 publica-tion of my dissertation (p. 74).”

As I read this part of the book, I found myself wondering about the risks that colloquists 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 inter-view with Lisa Delphi, 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 Delphi’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 Delphi, 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 any-one interested in the ways we negoti-ate 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 multifaceted impact of race on teach-ing 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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