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

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 considered 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

We are seniors at Jules E. Mastbaum Area Vocational Technical School in Philadelphia, PA. We were selected to participate in a 3-day conference. This conference was mainly about “equitable leadership.” We were among many teachers and principals from around the country. Who would have ever thought that we would all be together in one place, expressing our opinions about leadership in schools? All of us enjoyed ourselves so much that we decided to stay another day. The students from Mastbaum High School were chosen because of their strong leadership skills. When we participated in the “World Café” it gave us a chance to put our leadership skills to work. We were split up into different groups. We discussed our roles of leadership, how often we use leadership and who our influential role models are. Some of us were in groups with people from Massachusetts, Kentucky, Tennessee, New York and even people as far as Hawaii! We were so surprised to see how our schools here had so much in common with other schools across the nation. For our personal experiences we learned about event planning and the procedures of having a successful event. We did registration and took memorable pictures of different teachers and principals working as a group. We didn’t realize just how much was put into our education until now.

We appreciated the experience and we will never forget you guys.

Barbie, Joe and Kim

Barbie, Joe and Kim 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!