

Facilitating Teams Using Self As Instrument

Abstract:

The author has discovered that the art and mastery of facilitation requires continuous work on becoming more self aware, conscious and present. This paper addresses three guiding principles: trusting the process, trusting your hunches and being authentic. It also offers some tips to becoming more self aware and tips to stay centered and grounded when doing process consultation.

Many of us have studied and practiced facilitating from a “content” perspective: that is, learning intervention skills, process methodology, what makes effective teams, conflict resolution techniques, and so on. This is all useful knowledge to add to our “kitbag” to help us help teams become healthy, productive systems. What many of us don’t consider or spend enough time developing is the notion that who we are, what we model to the teams we work with, has a larger impact than we may ever think about or hear about. This paper will address ideas that I have developed and experienced working 20 years in the field of process consultation.

In order to become a masterful facilitator we need to develop our theory base, behavioral skills, intervention skills and self knowledge. Without awareness of self the other skills will be done by rote, and the facilitator will not create the dynamic that needs to exist between him/herself and team members to create the most transformational change. So taking time out to do our own inner work, to become more conscious, to understand ourselves in relation to others, is, in my experience, the most important ingredient in using self as instrument.

My own personal journey in recent years has been to focus on developing my awareness in the moment -- of self and others. Awareness of awareness makes all other learning easier. Most team issues can be boiled down using the iceberg theory to individual issues of self esteem -- issues of control, competence, dependency, fear, etc. Awareness is often the missing ingredient in our team participants and helping them become more aware in the moment can greatly enhance their performance in the team.

To use one’s self as instrument requires that we be fully present in the moment, pay attention to what is happening, and be aware of our own process at the same time we are aware of what is happening outside of us. Abraham Maslow has said that a self actualized person possesses three qualities:

1. To not be influenced by the good opinion of others.
2. To be detached from outcome.
3. To not be invested in having control over anyone.

The first quality in group work, “to not be influenced by the good opinion of others,” requires that a facilitator does not “take on” comments or behaviors of a group, that the facilitator stays true to herself, that she is authentic. For example, I was recently working with a group of young men with systems backgrounds who used humour not just to banter and lighten things up but also to take shots at each other and compete. A lot of issues in the team were avoided, deflected and hidden in the humour. The “good opinion” in the group was to “play,” often at the expense of others’ dignity and at the expense of being honest and direct about group issues. A part of me wanted to join the “fun” and I was tempted to start taking shots and noticed this in the moment. My ego needs to be accepted were getting in my way of staying neutral. I noticed this about myself and instead decided to name the behavior I was witnessing and point out to the group how in its excess their humour became negative and destructive. We discussed the norm in the group and, after many admitted that they felt hurt by it much of the time, the team decided to play when it was appropriate and to be direct in communicating behavioral issues with each other when that was appropriate.

The second quality, “not being attached to outcome” (or trusting the process), is a very difficult one to develop as so many of us have learned to be goal directed and in our work are contracted with our clients to produce. Of course our hope is that we can help move teams in conflict through and past their stuck places. But getting invested in this goal means we are attached. At the beginning of a team intervention I am often asked by participants, “What are we going to do?” “I’m not sure,” I say. “I can tell you some of the up-front processes that will get us started, but after that I don’t know.” “Well, what are your objectives?” they ask. “I don’t have any,” I say. “This is your process, not mine.” And on it goes (often with much frustration from the team members) until I hear myself say to them, “All I do is hold a belief that whatever needs to happen here will happen.” Often at the end of

the session they will tell me that initially they thought I was a flake but now they understand how important it was to go with the flow.

I often notice myself scurrying in my mind near the end of a session to fix, to get results, to make sure it ends on a high. If I am aware enough of my process I see my helper, my controller, at play and I pull back and let the group decide its course. I do this by getting them to talk about where they are, how they are feeling and what next steps they need to take.

It is not a bad thing if a team ends on a low note -- that is where they are. We need to dialogue about that. To create false hopes by manipulating agenda so that they have a "feel good" experience will only take them further back when they return to their normal work day activities.

The third quality of self actualized people, "not wanting to have control over anyone," is another tough one to develop. For instance, there are the classic participants -- the non-participants, the excessive talkers, the defensive ones, the aggressive ones, the indirect ones. When I get invested in wanting participants to be "different" than they are, rather than meeting them where they are and accepting that, I know I am in a place of ego and control versus a place of love and compassion. I remind myself that we are all just doing the best we can with what we've got at the time, and most of us are just asleep -- unaware of our defense mechanisms, our behaviors and their impact on others.

I had a participant named John in a team session recently. John was about 50 years old working in a systems area. Before the session started, the internal coordinator said, "You are going to have a participant from hell in your session today. He attacks and challenges everything, is opinionated, dominates the discussion, is really angry and bitter, and he doesn't want to be here today." As she was speaking, John walked into the room. I introduced myself and immediately bracketed in my mind all that she had told me. Had I been influenced by her "good opinion," I likely would have not stayed detached from any outcome for John and would have immediately moved into control by using meeting management techniques, and whatever other strategies I have learned, to "control" John. Instead, I listened to him, empathized with him, was curious about him, disagreed without making him wrong. I invited his opinion and accepted that he was (like all of us) "just doing the best he could with what he had, at the time." In short, I was in a place of heart, of love, not a place of control, ego and fear.

By the third day of the session John 'fessed up' in the main group. He said, "I am totally blown away. I really need some time to integrate all of this. I can't believe what my small group just told me. They told me that I show my feelings. And I have spent my life thinking no one ever saw them. I really don't know what to do with this." I looked at him and chuckled and said, "John, I'm with your small group. I see all your anger, and hurt, all your caring and passion." Before he left the room, he called the internal coordinator and thanked her for encouraging him to come. I had no need for John to be someone he wasn't, nor to "control" his behavior. He was deeply hurt by his past experiences. By consciously choosing to be in a place of love and meeting John where he was, in other words, my accepting him, helped others in the group be supportive and accepting of him. The beginning of his healing was dramatic.

So how do you move from a place of an easily influenced, goal oriented, controlling helper and fixer to a place of letting go, surrender and being able to trust the process and one's own intuitive hunches? Slowly, gently, and consciously with awareness. The answer also lies in learning to trust the process, being aware of self, paying attention to what is happening in the moment (it is all we have), becoming aware of and working through your own blocks, defense mechanisms and old negative patterns of behavior and thinking, continuous (w)holistic growth. This includes mental, emotional, physical and spiritual dimensions, trusting and acting on your intuition (discernment), being authentic and being present (fully awake, aware in the moment). For me, it has also meant that I have a choice to be in a place of love or fear, a place of peace or anxiety, a place of heart or ego. I am realizing that I can choose peace anytime.

My own experience has taught me the importance of building quiet, still time in each day for inner work. I will get up one or two hours before I need to in order to gift myself with the time of stillness. In our busy lives many of us forget how important it is to be with ourselves in order to follow our paths of growth. I will journal, or meditate, or do Chi Gong, or stretch or walk my dog in mindful, present ways. Sometimes, I will just sit and watch my thoughts. Sometimes I will connect with my higher power (or intuition) and ask questions, writing down the answers in order to tap my own "knowing-ness," my inner voice, my own innate wisdom. The path does not matter. The important thing is to create a path to be more self aware, to be disciplined in it, to care enough about yourself

to grow yourself to be your best. When I fall off my path, I get raggedy and anxious, and can become arrogant (in ego) in working with groups.

What does trusting the process mean?

At the end of an advanced facilitation skills workshop I was leading, a participant said, "Now I really understand what trusting the process means. When I came here I thought it meant trusting and sticking to the agenda I had created for the client." Sometimes, trusting the process means throwing the agenda out and, in the moment, deciding with the group where you are and where you need to go. Trusting the process means following, not leading. What is happening in the session with the group is what is happening back at the workplace. It just may be less obvious in some groups as they may be avoiding, placating or denying. But all the same behaviors will be in the room. Skillful diagnosis means looking beyond the "what" to the "how." Fritz Pearls wrote that all there is is "now" and "how," and anything else should be bracketed. I believe this is the kind of focus and concentration we as facilitators need to bring to our work. A skillful sheepdog masterfully facilitates sheep to move in the right direction -- quietly and from behind.

Trusting the process, for me, means holding a belief that there are no accidents and that everything happens for a reason. A Zen quote I like is, "If I understand, things are the way they are; if I don't understand, things are the way they are." Trusting the process also means I must leave my ego in abeyance and be aware when my ego is in the way. It means not having goals set by me for the team and letting the team take personal responsibility for its process. Taking responsibility for the team (control) only creates dependency and, although the team may perform brilliantly under my tutelage, they may quickly regress the next time they don't have a facilitator to depend on. In process consultation work, by day two with a group I rarely "say what I see," naming the behavior, or intervening with a diagnosis. Instead, I say, "let's stop for a moment and look at what is happening here. What do you see?" This is an example of helping a team become aware. If a team can become aware of its process in the moment, if it can pay attention to what is happening, if people can become aware of their awareness, the team will likely get to a place of high performance and health much more quickly. It will be able to transform the destructive energy (fear and anger acted out) to life-giving energy (goodwill and respect) manifesting in a very conscious way.

Trusting the process may mean closing the manual, tossing the agenda, and asking the group what they think is needed next. It means watching yourself, your own feeling reactions when "all hell breaks loose," when team members express strong emotion -- anger, hurt, pain -- often towards one another. It means not having "to do" but "to be" -- to hold space for what is happening. "Holding space" means being present with what is. It means allowing and surrendering to what is in the room, to letting it happen, to trusting that the way past it is through it.

It also may mean paying little attention to the clock -- to time. I remember in a 5-day Advanced Facilitation Skills program I was facilitating we had 23 participants and only 30 minutes to get through some kind of closure. Closure was very important as we had a very intense rich time together as a community. I trusted that we would do the right closure and that we would end on time. As the second hand hit the twelve at the designated hour, a participant who had been working on "letting go" of her control needs exclaimed, "I don't believe this -- talk about trusting the process -- look at that clock -- right on the dot!"

Authenticity vs. Role

We have a choice to act from a place that is true to ourselves or to act from a "role." The choice is really one of being personal or political.

Some examples of the differences are listed here:

Personal/Authentic	Political/Role
Insecurity	Security
Strength	Power
Vulnerability	Control
Acceptance	Blame
Responsibility	Obligations
Surrender	Submission

Discernment	Automatic reactions
Humility	Pride
Boundaries	Walls
Autonomy	Field dependency

A woman in a group once said to me, "You must be really hard to live with." "What do you mean?" I asked. "Well, you always tell the truth," she said. I fessed up that I wished this were true -- that I always was as honest as I thought it desirable to be, and how sad I felt that truth implies difficulty. To live authentically, in addition to the above partial listing, to speak your truth, to be yourself, to not be influenced by the good opinion of others, to not get invested in the mantra of the tribe that says, "but what will they think?" takes both courage and strength. And it may also mean making conscious choices about when it may be safer and smarter to be in role. The payoff of living authentically is one of self respect, freedom and peace.

Teams are full of conforming, compliant, complacent behavior -- people acting out the role, playing the game, behaving strategically, not expressing feelings or vulnerability. I often say to groups that many of us step across the threshold of our organization, put on our company suit and mask and leave much of who we are at the door. We wonder why, after a while, we feel like a fraud, like we don't fit. I often ask people in groups how many of them feel lonely in spite of being surrounded by people in the workplace. Often three quarters of the hands in the room will go up. Community building (which is a basis for effective teamwork) requires not only that we bring our role to work but also our heart and soul. I sometimes wonder why people put so much energy into hiding, pretending, masking, when most of us are so transparent that everyone sees our flaws as well as our strengths. Little kids and dogs know everything -- they know who is safe, who is present, who is interested in them and who is pretending. I think this is true of adults too. We may just not be aware of our awareness.

Living authentically means knowing that there is strength in vulnerability. I regularly tell stories in my work about my own struggles in life, my issues and challenges. I am not the expert, the great facilitator/consultant moving mountains. I am like all of us -- a human being along the journey of life with all its ups and downs and joys and lessons. Modeling vulnerability encourages vulnerability, and most teams in conflict will not get to their issues unless they are willing to be vulnerable. Carl Rogers said, "That which is most personal is most universal." When people in conflict or dialogue speak from their hearts instead of their egos, healing begins.

I was working with a small team of in-house consultants who were about to go through a reorganization. They had no "say" and weren't very happy about it because it meant losing some of their influence in the reporting structure. They needed to buy time to discuss it with their director. One of the women said, "I know, let's tell Steve that I've just returned from holidays and have been overwhelmed with work and haven't had time to think about it." I looked at her and said, "Joan, you could do that and you'd be lying. Why not tell Steve how deeply concerned you are and ask him to hold off on the announcement until you have all discussed all the ramifications of this move?" She immediately said, "You're right Linda," and we then discussed how important it is for internal consultants to model authenticity. So, they did in fact tell the truth, asked for what they wanted, shared their feelings, and got just what they wanted.

Self Awareness - Trusting Your Hunches - Centering

As facilitators we need to hold space, act as conduits, be lightning rods for teams, particularly when they are in high emotional states, such as conflict. It is really important to recognize what your own issues are and be aware when they pop up in group work. To get invested and take sides in group work is suicide. Neutrality is key as it allows whatever needs to clear out of the team to clear through you. If you become aware that someone is working on something that is a current issue for you, it is really important that in the moment you bracket it and find someone to help you clear it at a later time.

Centering and grounding are important to maintaining neutrality. Centering, being in harmony with inner wholeness, is achieved through awareness and quiet. The facilitator must feel whole and centered within. Listed below are some traps that impede centering.

TRAP	HOW IT WORKS
Doubting	Am I doing it right? Is this really helping? Wastes energy so that the facilitator may feel tired and low.
Transference	Occurs when the facilitator judges the present situation on the basis of past experiences. !! You remind me of another group, so I'll treat you like them. S/he ignores information from the field and does not meet the group where it is.
Projection	The facilitator may anticipate the field response rather than working with the actual conditions.
Projecting Outcome	e. g. Allowing the thought that !! there is little hope for improvement in this situation limits the practitioner's work. Inner stillness and awareness of wholeness have little chance of gaining strength. Projection of outcome, whether positive or negative takes the facilitator away from the moment of power -- NOW.
Taking on Another's Problem	(or falling into the field) occurs when the facilitator falls into the pain and or emotions of the group.
Smothering	The feeling of being totally responsible for another's state, does not recognize the others' path. Taking on another's problem, judging or imposing advice can stress both facilitator and group.
Holding Back	Protecting the receiver from you stems from self doubt and inexperience. Fear inhibits the intent to help.
Spacing Out	The facilitator is spacing out when s/he becomes so enchanted with what is happening that the team is forgotten.
Attachment to Outcome	The desire to produce visible results increases the practitioner's anxiety, while reducing respect for and recognition of the client's own path and timing.

In conclusion I would like to leave you with a prayer I say before group work (and at other times too).

To whomever you pray:

Please grace me with divine speaking.
 Please grace me with divine hearing.
 Please grace me with divine thinking.
 Please grace me with divine feeling.
 Please grace me with divine seeing.
 Please grace me with divine action.
 Please let me be aware that you are gracing me.

And may all of us speak our truth, keep our hearts open, be present, and take good care of ourselves.

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