



***Changing the World
One Meeting at a Time:
Facilitation as Feminist Praxis***



Random Notes for the Aspiring Facilitator¹

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1. Facilitation is the process of helping a group achieve the intention for which they have gathered – this could include solving a problem, accomplishing a task, making a decision, coming to agreement or engaging in a process of reflection and/or evaluation.
2. Successful facilitation depends on:
 - Careful preparation and planning;
 - A level of skills and behaviours;
 - Some knowledge of groups, people and processes (including process tools); and,
 - Right attitude.
3. In my experience, right attitude is the most critical of these criteria... Once we are aligned with a set of core values and beliefs about people, human potential and humanity as a whole, we are able better to facilitate groups.

¹*This document has been pulled together from consulting a couple of books that I've personally used when thinking about facilitation, as well, as a few random thoughts of my own drawn from my experiences as a facilitator. The document was originally developed to help a discussion on communication and facilitation skills with participants of the Isis International WHRD Activist School for We Act 1325 Members. It is still in draft form and only includes a few elements and principles related to communications and facilitation – please treat it as an initial listing and keep building upon this set of ideas through your own readings and experiences.*

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Core Values & Beliefs that Enable the Facilitator²

1. **People are doing the best that they have with the resources that they have** – every person, including the so-called “disruptors” or “space hoggers” is doing the best they can. If they knew better, they would do differently.
2. **If what you’re doing is not working, then do something else** – do not persist in a process if it meets with too much resistance. Check in with the group and what sentiments are then move into another modality or process.
3. **Groups of people naturally self-organise if you allow them** - ome people will take on leading, solving, analyzing, some stay quiet and listen... facilitators know just how much support to provide the group towards achieving its goals. As a facilitator, your role is not to sort out the power dynamics within the group... your role is to ensure that the group is able to achieve the intention that they have set out for themselves.
4. **The map is not the territory** – What we perceive is not necessarily the reality of the situation. Every individual carries in them a map of reality, and this map is made up of their own filters, made up of their values, beliefs, experiences. When there’s a conflict, the conflict is most often the result of the different maps of the world.
5. **Respect the other person’s model (map) of the world** – You may not agree with them, but you can respect that they hold a set of beliefs as a result of their map of the world.
6. **There are no resistant people, only inflexible communicators.**
7. **The element in the system with the most flexibility will have the most influence** – flexibility is key in facilitation.
8. **The meaning of the communication is in the response that you get** – This is the belief that we are responsible for how we communicate – so if someone doesn’t understand you, or gets angry with you (when that was not your intention) – then you apologise and say that you clearly have not gotten your message across in the way it was intended.
9. **You cannot NOT communicate** – This is a critical insight for facilitators because it points to all the non-verbal, and non-physical ways in which we communicate. As facilitators, we do need to train daily to be aware of what and how we are communicating to others.

²This list is a partial list of what are known as “presuppositions” that have been developed by the originators of an approach to communications, personal development and psychology known as Neuro-Linguistic Programming(NLP).

10. **There is no such thing as failure, only feedback** - Everything that happens gives you feedback and more information into a situation. All we need to do is to be able to perceive all feedback we receive, including negative feedback, as information.
11. **The mind and the body affect each other** - Just as our behavioural cues reveal what is going on in our minds, our behavioural cues also affect what does on in our minds. If we slouch while we sit, for example, we are like to feel more tired. Likewise, there are many ways in which we can maintain our composure and calm as facilitators, even as we better understand the non-verbal cues of the people we're seeking to facilitate.

The Facilitator's Kit of Essential Skills³

1. **Listening Skills** – capacity to “listen” intently to thoroughly understand each person and the group as a whole. “Listening” includes the capacity to sense the group, and to listen for all kinds of cues – both verbal and non-verbal.
2. **Summarising and Clarifying Skills** – capacity to summarise an individuals's comments, capturing the kernel of what the person want so add to the discussion. Helping the group distinguish between nuances in points being made. In this skill, it is essential to keep your analysis out of your summaries and to keep the essence of what the person is saying intact, without judging it, or deliberating editing out what you do not agree with.
3. **Group Dynamics Skills** – capacity to stay aware of what is happening in a group, even as it is happening. Prior knowledge of the group (its history, norms, orientation, and stage of group development) can help in staying aware and responsive to group dynamics as they happen.
4. **Process Skills** – some knowledge of processes and process tools and a capacity to know when a process tool might be utilized to support the outcome of a group. You don't use a hammer to swat a fly for example.
5. **Intervention/Conflict Management Skills** – capacity to know when and how to step in when something is interfering with the groups work.
6. **Recording and Graphic Skills** – Capacity to record the groups work in a manner that helps the groups to follow, remember and clarify its own thoughts. This can be practiced, and we can develop skills in organizing information and using graphics such that the group has a sense of where they are headed.

³Adapted from pg. 12-13, Kelsey, Dee and Plumb, Pam, *Great Meetings! Great Results*, Portland, MN: Great Meetings! Inc. (2004)

7. **Self-Management Skills** – Critical to being a facilitator is the capacity to manage your own emotions, regardless of what happens. The first consulting principle is that the only thing you can control is your response to situations. As Weisbord and Janoff say, “The trick is to change the inner dialogue from anxiety to observing without having to fix everything.”

A couple of key Principles in Facilitation⁴

1. **Differentiation/Integration (D/I) Theory** – I’ve found this to be one of the most useful theories in facilitating groups. Allow for groups to differentiate – that is to group similar things/ideas/beliefs together – before integrating – that is to harmonize, make one, coordinate.

The challenge with the D/I Theory is - “to help people differentiate their stakes without excluding anybody and integrating their goals without forcing unity⁵.”

This principle has so many applications, that it is not so much about process, as it is about understanding reality – everything and everyone differentiates before they integrate, and if we don’t allow for groups to differentiate before they integrate, what you might risk is false unity and not a strong sense of commonality around an issue.

D/I has so many practical application in the context of groups – and you will understand through D/I why some groups gel better than others. It is a way of planning meetings, figuring out who to invite and deciding on breakout groups. It can also be used to resolve conflicts and for decision making processes.

2. **Control what you Can, Let go of What you Can’t –**

Exercise Maximum Control Prior to the Meeting:

- i) Self Management;
- ii) Clarify Your Role in a Group (Process Facilitator? Process & Content? Process Content Meeting Management?);
- iii) Clarify the Purpose of the Meeting – Know it for yourself. Iv) Use subgroups to D/I Views

⁴This list of facilitator principles are largely drawn from Weisbord, Martin and Janoff, Sandra, Don’t Just Do Something, Stand There: Ten Principles for Leading Meetings that Matter, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers (2007)

⁵Pg. 8, Ibid

- iv) Always design program that Small Groups Report to the Whole – Never let Small Groups
 - v) Make sure that the Agenda is Doable within the Time Frame – Allow Time for D/I to take place
 - vi) Choose Healthy Work/Meeting Conditions – it does matter!
 - vii) Make agreements for working together – who will be responsible for what? The Facilitator is in charge of certain things (Time and Tasks, Making Room for All Views, Making sure the Space stays Inclusive, Keeping the Meeting Goals in Sight), while the Participants are in charge of other things (Information and Meaning Making, Managing their own Participation, Deciding on Common Ground/Action)
3. **Get the Whole System in the Room** – this is a concept that Marvin Weisbord advocates for 21st century organisations – and that I would say in true in every group process where there is a decision to be made that has impact on everyone in the system. We need to find methods that enable everyone to become involved in improving the whole system, without having to be an “expert” in the system.

Six practices recommended by Weisbord and Janoff that are essential for improving the whole system:

- i) Define the Whole System – Define the purpose of the meeting clearly so that you can decide who within the system ARE IN the meeting. –

Authority to act (eg. Decision making responsibility for org or community)

Resources, such as contacts, time or money;

Expertise in the issued to be considered;

Information about the topic that no others have; and,

Need to be involved because they will be affected by the outcome and can speak to the consequences.

- ii) Match the People to the Task – No issue is too large or too small so long as the task is within the capacity of all those who attend. Match

- iii) Match the Meeting’s Length to the Agenda

- iv) Give People Time to Express Themselves – When the topic being discussed has consequence to the people attending, and they are passionate about it, it

does not matter if there's only one policy decision to be made – people will need space to be heard.

- v) Manage Meeting Using D/I Principles
- vi) Use the 3 by 3 Rule if you can't get the whole system

4. Explore the Whole Elephant

You need the **Whole System in the room to explore the Whole Elephant**...In systems thinking, everything is connected to everything else, and its important that the larger context of any issue is brought into the meeting in which decisions are going to be made – this helps to transcend conflicts, and create the possibility of more common ground. Turning “my facts and your facts into our facts.” Examples of Whole system techniques i) Apply a “Go Around” – get everyone to state why they are there and what they would like to achieve, or use it anyone there is a moment of confusion of clarity to get everyone's views on board. ii) Use Time Lines iii) Make Mind Maps iv).Draw A Group Flow Chart.

When everyone's Maps of the World get viewed, changes for finding common ground are better, and decisions get made on the basis of what everyone sees, rather than what a few think is critical. These techniques however are simply ways to work with the principles of Exploring the Whole Elephant – so its important that people realize that the part of the Elephant that they are holding on to, is only one part of the big picture...so that the group makes the inner shift to recognizing other world views/realities, and becoming aware of their own.

- 5. **Create space for people to think their own thoughts** – Often people come into meetings and group processes without having had time to deeply reflect on their own thoughts. Weaving into the meeting space for reflection can help people stay connected with what they value and how they want to represent these values in a group context. This principle is a critical way in meeting and training settings where there is a lecture, speech or documentary film shown – allow time just after the big content input for people to reflect for a few minutes, alone and perhaps if it's a big meeting, with in twos and threes. Only then do you open the floor for plenary discussion.
- 6. **Let people be responsible** - This for me is such a critical piece in facilitation, and one that I think we often get wrong in many women's movement spaces (at least the one's I've observed/participated in). We imagine that the role of the facilitator is there to “control” or “manage” group dynamics – to hold back the “dominant” ones, and create space for the “quiet” ones – and forcing those who don't want to speak to give their views. We imagine that call upon “quiet’ people to give their views is

participation – but in fact, this is a form of subtle coercion and does not enable people to take responsibility for their own behavior. Also by silencing, ignoring or worse, shaming those who are talkative, full of ideas and judging them as dominant, does not help the whole group feel comfortable and trust the space. It is very easy for the facilitator to take on the role of “boss” or “teacher” and end up losing rapport with the group.

So! Firstly, it is important to go back to the Core Values and Beliefs list that I mentioned above, and hold those beliefs as you do the work of facilitation. Remember that you are NOT there to solve the groups power dynamics or interpersonal problems, nor are you there to provide counseling or psychological help to individual participants – you are only there to help the group achieve its goal/intention by the end of the meeting.

- i) **Everyone is doing the best that they can with the resource that they have** – you can't get more from people than what they have to offer at that time – What people offer a group is what you have to work with.
- ii) **Let People Hide their Hidden Agendas** - Do not ask people what they are not saying – this is a form of subtle coercion, and it reduces the capacity of a group to take responsibility. Let people reveal what they want to reveal – we can encourage openness but never demand it.
- iii) **Do Less so that Others will Do More** – The more you step back/Hold back/Just stand there – the more others will come forward to act. In Facilitation, one needs to learn how to “Just Stand There” and not constantly “Do Something.” From experience, I can say safely that everyone you rush to solve, resolve, decide for the group on any matter, the less responsibility the group will take, and then you will have people taking less and less responsibility. Always check with participants before making decisions on behalf of the group.
- iv) **Encourage Self-Management** - Where possible, do not assign facilitators to small groups – let the group take responsibility for themselves and allow them to organize without formal leaders/Facilitators. Encourage people to divide roles between themselves and work out the way they will work.

7. Find Common Ground before Finding Solutions

When decisions need to be made, it is best that the group is allowed to find its common ground first. Rushing to make a decision or find a solution without finding common ground (which includes acknowledging where the group doesn't agree) means that the group loses an opportunity to find points of cohesion.

Weisbord and Janoff's definition of Common Ground: *“Those statements every person will agree with after all views have been heard and disagreements made public. The major benefit of finding common ground is increased cooperation and*



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fast action on matters of shared concern. When some people agree and others don't, treat that as a reality to live with, not a problem to be solved."

Recommended Readings:

1. Weisbord, Martin and Janoff, Sandra, **Don't Just Do Something, Stand There: Ten Principles for Leading Meetings that Matter**, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers (2007)
2. Kelsey, Dee and Plumb, Pam, **Great Meetings! Great Results**, Portland, MN: Great Meetings! Inc. (2004)