

Clear Sailing the Sea of Facilitation

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Introduction

“The winds and waves are always on the side of the best navigators.”

(Edward Gibbon, English Historian)

Changing Role of Leadership

The role of the leader has become increasingly complex. Globalization, escalating market competition, a multi-generational workforce, and growing consumer demands are but a few of the many factors compelling organizations to be in a state of constant change. No longer can leaders aspire to be effective through the assimilation of a long list of desirable leadership traits nor is leadership about having all the answers. In his opening remarks in *The Dance of Change*, Peter Senge wrote, "If you are an organizational leader, someone at any level concerned deeply about these challenges, then you face a daunting task. In effect, you are engaged in a great venture of exploration, risk, discovery, and change, without any comprehensive maps for guidance". (1999)

In many respects the difference between a good and great organization comes down to people. As the venerable Peter Drucker points out, "Of all the decisions an executive makes, none are as important as the decisions about people because they determine the performance capacity of the organization." (1999) Today, effective leaders must draw upon the knowledge and skills of their people to build creative responses and solutions to organizational challenges.

The mountain men of the Rocky Mountain fur trade in the 1820's and '30's were intrepid explorers and inveterate adventurers. They became the guides for the wagon train migrations of the 1850's and '60's. They were qualified to lead because they had been there. They knew the secrets. They had mastered the crafts. Many a person in a leadership role still fancies him/herself out in the lead, driving the organization to success, and having the brains and intuitions required to get the enterprise where it is going. As romantic as that image may be to some people, that paradigm will never supply the solution again. Leadership, going forward, is not as much about telling as it is about hearing; not as much about knowing as it is about facilitating dialogue and inquiry; not as much about being in charge as it is about enabling the necessary capabilities and outcomes. (Daniel D. Elash & James R. Long, 2001)

How can a leader mine the ideas, energy, passion, and insights of the people? Group facilitation provides one answer. By definition a leader is a person who guides or inspires others; a facilitator is a person who directs, assists, and stimulates. The similarities are obvious. This does not suggest that a leader should or can always assume this role effectively. It is therefore critical to the success and well-being of the team that leaders be cognizant of appropriate facilitation opportunities and limitations.

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership is described as a root concept (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; May, et al., 2003) that underlies transformational, charismatic, and servant leadership. These authors propose that authentic leadership begins with developing authenticity; that increasing self-awareness is a key component in developing authentic leadership and that authentic leaders are "more aware of, and committed to, their core end values". To provide clarity, self-awareness is "an emerging process where one continually comes to understand his or her unique talents, strengths, sense of purpose, core values, beliefs and desires". (Gardner & Avolio, 2005, 12)

Authentic leaders are more interested in empowering people they lead to make a difference than they are in power, money, or prestige for themselves. Authentic leaders use their natural abilities, but they also recognize their shortcomings and work hard to overcome them. To become authentic, each of us has to develop our own leadership style, consistent with our personality and character. Unfortunately, the pressures of an organization push us to adhere to its normative style. But if we conform to a style that is not consistent with who we are, we will never become authentic leaders. To be effective in today's fast-moving, highly competitive environment, leaders also have to adapt their style to fit the immediate situation. There are times to be inspiring and motivating, and times to be tough about people decisions or financial decisions. There are times to delegate, and times to be deeply immersed in the details. There are times to communicate public messages, and time to have private conversations. (George, 2003)

So it is that authentic leaders are required to make challenging decisions. These include in what circumstances they may guide a group process and in what situations they should relinquish the facilitation reins to enable full participation as members of teams.

Authentic leaders know the "true north" of their moral compass and are prepared to stay the course despite challenges and disappointments. Leading with heart may sound soft, as if authentic leaders can't make tough choices involving pain and loss; it is anything but. Leading with heart means having passion for your work, compassion for the people you serve, empathy for your teammates, and the courage to make tough calls. (George, 2006)

Facilitation and Parallel Thinking

"We cannot solve the significant problems of today with the same level of thinking we used when we created them." A. Einstein

If a component of authentic leadership is to "facilitate dialogue and inquiry" and if "self-awareness is truly an appropriate starting point for interpreting what constitutes authentic leadership development", leaders must explore their capability in this regard and must seek to learn more about when and how to accomplish this particular competency.

To assist in the provision of a succinct, yet comprehensive exploration of the multiple facets of facilitation, a strategy based on the fundamentals of parallel thinking will be utilized.

Parallel thinking is best understood in contrast to traditional argument or adversarial thinking. With the traditional argument or adversarial thinking each side takes a different position and then seeks to attack the other side. Each side seeks to prove that the other side is wrong. With 'parallel thinking' both sides (or all parties) are thinking in parallel in the same direction. There is cooperative and co-coordinated thinking. The direction itself can be changed in order to give a full scan of the situation. But at every moment each thinker is thinking in parallel with all the other thinkers. There does not have to be agreement. Statements or thoughts which are indeed contradictory are not argued out but laid down in parallel. In the final stage, the way forward is 'designed' from the parallel thoughts that have been laid out. (Edward De Bono -, n. d.)

As such, this paper will explore, in parallel, six different components of facilitation. These include:

- Background information
- Gut feelings and emotions
- Cautions, dangers, risks, and difficulties
- Benefits and value
- Creative possibilities and alternatives
- Logistics of the process

Taken together, these points will lay out, side by side, fundamental considerations in respect to facilitation that will enable the conception of a strategy for future deliberation.

Facilitation

Facilitation is an art in the finest sense – both from the perspective of an artist and as a viewer. Each time a group interacts, a painting emerges. With careful and diligent observation, a story unfolds – enhanced or diminished by our willingness to be a bridge or an obstruction. Buddhists believe that we do not learn from our experiences, but rather by our willingness to experience. (Lee Mun Wah, 2004)

Background Information

“Know thyself,” appears in the writings of Ovid, Cicero, and Socrates, in the sayings of the Seven Sages of Greece, on the entrance to the temple of Apollo, in Christian writings and in Eastern texts. Chaucer, Browning, Pope, Montaigne, de Saint-Exupéry, and Lao Tzu all express variations of the precept. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Abraham Maslow, Warren Bennis, and Stephen Covey have carried on the tradition.

If leaders want to be more effective with others, they first need to become more effective with themselves. Instead of focusing on finding the right partner (in business or friendships) seek to be the right partner. Commit to authentically getting to know your total self. Practice being what you wish others to become. (Cashman, 1997)

The assumption that authentic leaders must know themselves implies they must also know what would be required of them in the role of facilitator. Gathering background information about an endeavor supports a leader’s decision to assume or pass on the role.

Harvest of this information should be guided by the following questions: What is the history of the team/group? Is there a possibility of conflict; can you as facilitator remain objective and move the group

towards a positive solution? What is the nature and purpose of the meeting (outcomes and objectives); do you as leader have a stake or interest in the outcome? Will information be imparted or sought?

Safe and non-controversial agenda items (ones that will not evoke emotional responses from the group) or the need to communicate information invite a leader to act as facilitator; influence is without merit and therefore unlikely. Other activities, such as those involving strategic planning and budget cuts, require frank discussion and aggregate involvement. As such, leaders should not act as facilitators; participants may perceive a bias or hidden agenda.

Gut Feelings and Emotions

Leadership deals with the world of emotions and feelings. It is more of an art than a science. Like artists, leaders have the ability to share their vision of the world. Leaders influence our perceptions and help us look at situations in new ways. These skills – and – the leadership principles that guide their development – are critical to the success of an organization or team. (Clemmer, 2003)

Facilitation, like leadership, is truly an art; it forces those involved in the process to become experts while the facilitator guides the discussion. Feelings are often based on years of experience and should not be discounted in decisions about facilitation. “Normally, they are excluded because they are neither fact nor logic.” (Moerman & de Haas, 2006) We cannot always put into words what our gut feelings and emotions, these non-factual and non-logical “senses”, tell us; subconsciously our mind has already evaluated factors that will impact us and has made us aware of something, good or bad, that will intuitively guide our actions.

What are your feelings in respect to facilitation? What is your gut reaction to this undertaking? Could you effectively undertake this role? If you are at all uncomfortable with the concept, reconsider. Is the topic one that will be emotionally charged for you and your group? If it is, the skills of an external facilitator will enable equal, controlled participation and will soften perceptions that you are controlling or manipulating the outcome. Do you have the skills, the personality, and the desire to assume the facilitation challenge? Can you communicate a vision while at the same time guiding the process? Are you hesitant only because you lack experience? If so, can you locate an experienced facilitator who will welcome you as co-facilitator? Leaders can and do facilitate; the decision to do so is impacted by the conviction that underlies the answers to many of these questions.

Cautions, Dangers, Risks, and Difficulties

In the industrial age the physical strength of the workers powered the organization, but in the post-modern economy, it is the workers' knowledge that creates the value. These changes have necessitated an evolution in our thinking about workers and leadership. There are always barriers to doing anything well. Some of those barriers are legitimately difficult to navigate. So what? If excellence were easy to attain it would be commonplace. (Elash & Long, 2001)

Consider some of the reasons why leaders take on the role of facilitator. They believe they can save money and time. It is faster and easier to schedule (or re-schedule) the time around other activities

without needing to consider the calendar of an outside person. There is a perception of greater control of agenda items and time required to achieve the outcome.

However, there are also risks inherent in this undertaking. They may include:

- Rubber-stamping meetings... leading the group to a solution the leader wants;
- Lower participation... leaders talk 60 percent of the time;
- Too many roles... cannot effectively be a referee, score keeper, captain, coach, and team member all at once.

What is gained in terms of time and money may be insignificant when compared to what is lost in terms of respect and trust. The perception of a manipulative facilitator can stall a team and create the need for more meetings, fresh beginnings, and ultimately the requirement of re-work and damage control.

Emotional topics invite challenge, conflict, and the need for skillful management of potentially challenging people. Do you have the skills to re-focus and re-direct? Are you willing to accept challenges openly and objectively? Can you distance yourself from the situation and refrain from reacting to what may appear to be personal attacks? Your position and your knowledge may prevent neutrality. Your reactions will determine whether your credibility is damaged and the meeting takes a turn for the better or worse.

Benefits and Values

Authentic leaders build the trust that bridges the gaps between “us and them”. Such leaders have high integrity and consistency. They foster environments of openness and transparency, which gets real issues on the table. (Clemmer, 2003)

The first tangible benefit derived from the leader acting as facilitator has dollar signs attached to it. Leaders acting in the role of facilitator bolster the bottom line. Of course that is only true when things run smoothly and outcomes are achieved. Problems caused by inappropriate or ineffective facilitation result in withdrawals from financial and emotional bank accounts. The latter are not readily recoverable and can undermine future efforts to attain cooperation and buy-in. While financial savings are not to be discounted, this benefit is diluted by a more significant yet related outcome; the creation of trust and the empowerment of group members for future activities, if the leader performs the role well. “A facilitator frees group members to focus on their common task. By assuming the responsibility for guiding the group, you offer people a better opportunity to achieve what is called synergy; when the group itself becomes more than the sum of individual members.” (Doyle & Straus, 1993)

Recognition of the power afforded them through participation allows group members to grow and learn beyond their current state. “Strong leaders engage people’s hearts.” (Clemmer, 2003, p. 126) Knowing they have the support of their leader fosters desire to undertake more action items and leads to an increased sense of ownership.

Creative Possibilities and Alternatives

If a would-be leader wants glamour, he should try acting in the movies. However, if he in fact wants to make a consequential impact on a cause or an organization, he needs to roll up his sleeves and be prepared to perform a series of grungy chores which are putatively beneath him, and for

which he'll never receive recognition or credit, but by virtue of which his lieutenants will be inspired and enabled to achieve great things. (Sample, 2002)

Are there alternatives to the leader acting as facilitator? Absolutely! The first, and perhaps most overlooked alternative, arises from answers to the questions, "Is a meeting really necessary?" and "Can the objectives be achieved through other means: email, on-line forum, electronic whiteboard?" A second alternative arises from a leader asking another, more difficult question, "Do I need to be there?"

If it is determined that a meeting truly is required, then what choices exist in respect to facilitation? Are there individuals within the organization, or within the team, who routinely act as facilitators and could take this on? Should an external person be involved? What would that person bring to the activity? How would greater commitment be achieved? What must be considered in the retention of an external facilitator (cost, ability, confidentiality)?

"Like a good ship's captain, leaders rely upon reports from their crew in order to navigate through treacherous waters." (Clemmer, 2003) A variety of tools and methods exist that enhance the facilitation process and enable the effective sharing of information. These differ depending upon the desired outcome and the nature of the data to be shared. They may include such techniques as brainstorming, cause and effect diagrams, nominal group technique, and so on. These are but a few of the tools used by creative facilitators to engage people and move a group forward. What is in your facilitator's tool kit?

Logistics of the Process

"Within the workplace, a leader typically has a clear mental picture of what success looks like for a particular project or, more generally, for a successful team or the organization as a whole." (Clemmer, 2003) The leader has only to develop a strategy for the transference of this image into reality. The creation of an effective process is instrumental to the attainment of desired outcomes.

"Learning to become a facilitator is like learning to play a game or a sport. You can learn the rules quickly and begin to play. But to become a good player takes considerable practice. You must know something about the theory of the game and about strategies for dealing with different situations as they come up." (Doyle & Straus, 1993, Chapter 6, p1)

The complexity of the role of leader often limits time and the opportunity to develop strong, extensive facilitation skill sets. With the many roles a leader has to fulfill, do you have the time to take on this additional responsibility and do it well?

The role of the facilitator is threefold; it involves results, process, and people. Do you have the necessary skills to enable you to effectively achieve the following?

- Ensuring participation by all group members;
- Handling silences;
- Dealing with problem people;
- Speeding up or slowing down the group;
- Admitting mistakes;
- Moving the group forward when they get "stuck";
- Regulating discussion traffic;
- Remaining neutral;
- Building trust;
- Being an observer;
- Keeping quiet.

If not, you must consider additional training or the involvement of another facilitator.

Conclusion

Since the role of the facilitator is based on flexibility and accommodations to the needs of the group members, it would be hypocritical and impossible to lay out a step-by-step procedure comparable to Robert's Rules of Order. Unlike the chairperson who can waltz to the regulated music of Robert's Rules of Order, the facilitator has to do a combination tap dance, shuffle, and tango to a syncopated rhythm produced by unpredictable humans. (Doyle & Straus, 1993)

Facilitation is not as easy as throwing together some flipchart paper and a tub of markers and embarking upon a team journey to the attainment of some lofty goal. An authentic leader must first decide whether to act as the navigator or join the ranks of the deck hands. The rule of thumb is that if you, as the leader, "have more than 20% influence on the content of the decision or discussion" (Couves, 2005), you should consider an external facilitator. A leader, as a facilitator, risks appearing manipulative when he/she contributes ideas or evaluates those of others. Trust is destroyed when a leader assumes the role of facilitator and fails to maintain required neutrality.

If, upon self-reflection, a leader deems it advisable to don the hat of facilitator, a strategy can then be created based upon an examination of desired outcomes, an understanding of the team, a consideration of the challenges and potential stumbling blocks, and review of the process logistics.

So the question ultimately becomes... do you want to build bridges or obstructions? The answer to that question will determine whether you, as leader, should wear the facilitator's hat. Choose wisely... your authenticity is in question!

Biographies

Robert Stumbur has worked at NAIT since 1999. Initially, he was an instructor within the Computer Systems Technology program and then he assumed the role of Chair of that same program. In 2003, he took on the role of Associate Dean of the School of Applied Media and Information Technology. Within that role, he is responsible for several different programs including Computer Systems Programs, Radio and Television, Photography, Digital and Interactive Media Design, and Graphic Communications.

Roxanna Stumbur has worked at NAIT since 2000. Initially, she was an instructor in the Computer Systems Technology program and then within the School of Business. In 2004, she took on her current role. As an Organizational Development Consultant, Roxanna's responsibility is "organizational effectiveness". As such, she trains leaders and assists her organization in the areas of change management, strategic planning, professional development, succession management, and conflict resolution. Her current passion is Appreciative Inquiry as both a philosophy and a change process. She is championing its use within her organization.

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