

Facilitator Musings: The Inner Frontier

By Dick Axelrod

In 1971, I was a young manager participating in a team-building session facilitated by an external consultant named Bill Fillmore. I remember watching him standing at the flip chart and saying to myself, “How hard can that be? You stand at a flip chart and write down a few words now and then. I can do that.”

I was in a fast-track management development program. I needed a staff job to support my fledgling career. Not knowing I was making a choice that would shape my career, (It’s often that way with life-changing decisions.) I applied for an internal consulting job in our company’s newly formed internal consulting unit.

Well, it turns out there’s more to facilitating than writing down a few words, as we’ve all learned. Some people say I’m a good facilitator, and call my work magic. Some don’t. I’m never as good or as bad as people say I am.

After 37 years of facilitating since that fateful day, I want to share with you some things that are important to me. They are not the truth with a capital T, but they are useful to me, and perhaps to you. In no particular order, then...

You are only as good as your client. Good clients are partners. They see the best in you and take your work to places you never thought it could go. Hank Queen, former VP of Engineering at Boeing, was such a person. He saw the possibilities in what I had to offer, and together we helped transform his organization.

Hank would often begin meetings by saying, “Dick, I’ve been thinking about...”, and we would be off to the races. Actually, it was me who was racing, trying to keep up with what Hank thought we could do.

Good clients push you. They bring out the best in you. They make you think. Most of all, they don’t let you get away with what you’ve done before. So pick them wisely.

How you show up counts. When I’m in the room with a client, I’m naked. Not literally, of course. I’m there without books, without the internet, without a lifeline. It’s just me and the client. It doesn’t matter whether the client is one person, a group, or even a system.

Tools and techniques do not assure greatness. Ultimately, tools and techniques do not care how they are used. The differentiator is you. How you show up makes a difference. Do you show up with a solution in mind or do you show up wanting to support the solution that is about to form?

I was facilitating a large group session when one of our biggest supporters stood up in the middle of the session and said, “I’m really feeling manipulated by this process.” The group went silent.

I was so shocked he said this; I didn’t know what to do. I mumbled a few words and moved on to the next activity. During the break, my friend came up to me and said, “I took a big risk out there; I was voicing what other people were feeling. You abandoned me.”

Had I had my wits about me when this issue came up, I would have asked, “Who else feels this way?” We would have gone on to discuss how people were feeling manipulated by the process, and we could have addressed the issue immediately so they were not feeling manipulated. The choices we make as facilitators matter. I learned.

You have to know who you are and what makes you tick. This is a lifelong process. I feel I keep dealing with the same issues over and over again. Sometimes I deal with them at deeper levels of understanding, sometimes not.



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If you have issues with authority, then you need to know what part of group issues is your stuff and what is theirs. I root for the underdog. I have empathy for the wounded, for those struggling to make a difference. When I'm working to make sure every voice is heard, what part of that is my issue? Do I work equally as hard to make sure leadership's voice is heard?

Keep the end in mind.

Bypass surgery taught me how difficult it can be to change even when your life depends on it.

Following my surgery, I realized if I didn't want my chest cracked open again, then I had to get serious about exercise, diet, and managing the stress in my life. But there are days when I don't want to exercise, when I don't want to watch what I eat, when it's too much trouble to do the things I know will reduce stress.

This doesn't mean I want my chest cracked open again. It just means it's too difficult to do that particular day. What I've learned is that even when you want to change, sometimes you work against yourself. When this happens with a client, it doesn't mean my client isn't committed to the change. It just means they have had a momentary relapse, and my job is to support them as they get back on track.

I'm incredibly optimistic. It's probably why I'm a Chicago Cubs fan. What else can explain that? The Cubs haven't been to the World Series in one hundred years. But every year, I hope this is the year they make it.

Listen deeply. Listening builds trust. Other than that, it's not important. If you don't care about building trust with your clients, you can skip this section.

It's easy to go through the motions of listening and not really be present at all. I know how to act as if I'm listening intently when I'm only half there, and I know it doesn't work.

I try to stand in the other person's shoes and see the world through their eyes. There is an imaginary line between me and the other. I cross the line and stand beside them. What does the world look like from the other side of the line? What are they thinking? What do they want? What are they feeling?

These are all questions I try to answer. I pretend I'm a researcher and these are my research questions.

When I do this really well, insights emerge and opportunities open up. When I don't do it well, what I see reinforces my previously held beliefs.

Now of course, if all you do is listen, it's not enough. But when your speaking comes from a place of listening and understanding the other, your words will be heard.

Let go of the outcomes. Of course I want my clients to succeed. And the best way I can help them succeed is to not be invested in their success. That doesn't mean I abdicate my responsibility for doing my very best. I can confront, empathize, support, and coach, but in the end it's the choices they make that determine the outcome.

This is a difficult lesson. At least it was for me. You may want the client to make other choices, to go in a different direction. But when they stand at the crossroads, they must choose the path. My job is to support them.

I offer my opinions, share my experience, and provide options. Ultimately, it's the client's choice. My value is in what I offer up, not in how many of my ideas they implement. I try to make my clients think.

Sometimes I choose to make clients think by taking the contrarian point of view. I speak for those who aren't in the room. I don't simply accept the first response, but rather probe for deeper meaning. I might ask a client what is open for discussion when we involve the larger system in our work. The client responds, "Everything." Then I ask, "What if people want to change the reward system, or what if they want to go in a direction that is different than the one you are proposing?" The client stops and hesitates. Now they are not sure everything is on the table. If I've made them think, consider options, other viewpoints and consequences, then I've done my job.

If you can avoid it, never work alone. Sometimes I worry about the reaction when I say, "We will need two people to facilitate this meeting." After all, I could probably do it myself. But it wouldn't be as good.

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I know working with someone else is not without its problems. Co-facilitators must contend with different styles, a different sense of pace. Different facilitators emphasize different things. They view the world differently.

And that is just the point. Two people provide diversity and richness. They see things the other person doesn't see. They relate to the group differently. All of this adds value.

Two heads really are better than one. When you are trying to sort out what is happening, another set of eyes and ears is priceless.

I like working with people who are different from me. The client doesn't need a clone. Variety brings about adaptation and learning as you incorporate differing perspectives. It's hard work. It's much easier to work with someone who agrees with you. And it's not as much fun. The key is to be different enough to be creative, but not so different that you get in each other's hair.

Work with someone you really respect. Respect shows, and so does lack of respect, no matter how much you think you are hiding your true feelings. Clients sense this, and it takes focus away from their own work.

Clients often make comparisons between facilitators. If the client likes you and doesn't like your partner, don't be seduced. See these comparisons for what they are – attempts to divide and conquer.

I do a lot of co-facilitating with my wife, Emily, which brings its own special set of challenges. The one thing we know is that we are not going to let the other fail. It is not in our interest to look good at the other's expense.

Find the humor in the situation. Poke fun at yourself; never make fun of your client. Funny situations happen all the time, and they can be a bonding experience.

I was having dinner with Neil after a difficult day, in the midst of an even more difficult consultation. We were really engrossed in figuring out what to do the

next day. I looked down at my pasta bowl and saw this hand clutched around a bread roll, moving toward the red sauce at the bottom of my pasta bowl. Neil swirled the roll around my bowl, sopping up the remaining sauce. When there was none left, he deftly moved the roll to his mouth. I stared down at my gleaming bowl.

The sauce was gone without a trace. You've really bonded with a person when you've sopped bread with them.

Ever gone dumpster diving? You haven't lived 'til you've dived head first, past coffee cups, through layers of last night's tiramisu, while looking for last night's flip charts. And when you surface with your coffee-stained, chocolate-smearred flip charts in hand, you know you've given it your all for your client.

My colleague Nancy is short, so short that in a large group, it can be difficult to see her if you are sitting at the back of the room. We were co-facilitating a large group session when someone called out, "Nancy, we can't see you."

She took action. She found a long stick, and created a colorful pennant using construction paper and decorated it with sparkles, stars, and dots. She carefully lowered the stick into the back of her skirt and began to walk back and forth in front of the room. Sitting in the back of the room, I still couldn't see Nancy, but I could see this pennant moving back and forth with this disembodied voice and a thick New York accent saying, "Here I am. Can you see me now?"

It helps me now and then to step back and consider what I've learned in my work. I'd love it if you'd join the conversation. You can reach me at Dick@AxelrodGroup.com. ☞

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