What It Takes:
Perspectives for Facilitating Decision Making

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Individuals and groups face the challenge to assure their organizations survive fast-paced, unpredictable changes of the business landscape. Technological innovations, unstable markets, and social changes all make planning, problem solving and other decision making difficult. As Sandor Schuman stated in an editorial in Group Facilitation, "To meet these challenges, we must address the intellectual, analytical and cognitive demands of the situation. At the same time, we must help groups engage interpersonally, politically, emotionally, and spiritually," (Schuman, 2002). Professionals who work in the field of facilitation face these challenges every day as they support clients through decision making.

The facilitator makes this work easier by structuring and guiding participation of the members (Rees, 1998, p. 11). As the group moves through decision making, obstacles that arise could block progress. Differences in style, expectations and direction among group members can take the work off track, leaving members frustrated with the process and each other. The work of facilitators has been compared to that of a symphony conductor. They orchestrate and bring out the talents and contributions of all participants in the process (Spencer, 1989, p. 12).

Skilled facilitators are valuable guides as individuals and groups make decisions that are critical to survival in the business world. These professionals are asked to respond, prod, encourage, guide, coach and teach as they take members of an organization through effective processes. They must be better than merely good at what they do—they have to be highly skilled.

What is it that makes a talented facilitator? The International Association of Facilitators has developed a set of competencies to evaluate and certify facilitators. Similarly the Organizational Development Practitioners outlined competencies they believe are keys to being a skilled professional. It is easy to recognize the abilities when working with a skilled person, but articulating the particular characteristics that make a great facilitator is challenging. Are great facilitators born or can a person be taught the skills and coached to greatness? If one is going to teach a person to be a great facilitator, is there anything beyond the discreet skills and competencies already delineated? What is the "art" of individuals who work most effectively to support group processes?

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Something More

Many facilitators' skills match those in the lists of competencies, however, for a very few, there seems to be something more—something that goes beyond the application of discreet skills. The lists of competencies are useful descriptors of the work of facilitators; however there is something more that basic lists don't seem to describe.

That "something more" is an attitude or sensibility that highly skilled facilitators bring to their work to gain that edge over the majority of facilitators. This sensibility is difficult to describe, but so obvious when it is present.

Because of their skills, these facilitators' services are in great demand, so it is difficult to get significant time to talk with them. Additionally they are often reticent to talk about themselves, or they are at that peak of performance where they are not aware of what they do that makes them so highly effective.

No one who has watched a gifted facilitator with a group can deny that they are consummate trainers, presenters, and facilitators. Their deep wealth of knowledge about complex systems, their skills in "reading" a group by listening to underlying questions and presenting issues, their ability to be flexible and responsive to the needs of the group, and their creativity in identifying solutions—these are the types of skills that go beyond traditional checklists.

I recently engaged one such facilitator in a discussion about what makes her—and other gifted facilitators— so effective. In response to the question, she engaged me in an analytical activity. Initially, she didn't know what to say. She was, however, willing to explore the question. In that exploration, it was clear she was learning and teaching at the same time—growing in her own understanding as we learned more about her work and how she does it.

Through the afternoon, what emerged was of a set of perspectives—both behavioral and cognitive—that we posed as being requirements of doing this work. The lists represent both the "doing" and the "thinking" that contributes to the effectiveness of a facilitator, and we identified discreet core skills for each perspective. The **behavioral perspectives** provide those insights the facilitator uses to support a group's interactions around the issues at hand. The **cognitive perspectives** allow the facilitator to process information to trigger questions, focus on insights, and overcome barriers as the group is working.

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Behavioral Perspectives

The first set of perspectives addresses the facilitator's "doing"— behaviors and actions that support groups' work—and includes the following skills:

- ► Building relationships
- ► Shifting point of view
- ► Discerning patterns
- ► Generating options
- ► Evaluating outcomes

Building Relationships –The primary role of a facilitator has been described as assisting people or groups engage in constructive dialogue (Gray, 1989, p. 163). Competence in this area depends on the ability to establish a culture of trust and openness, and requires the facilitator to work from a perspective that sees and builds productive relationships.

Reams have been written about how facilitators establish rapport and trust in a group by treating participants with respect and by honoring individual contributions. The foundational skill in this area is *deep listening*. Those who listen deeply, read body language, hear unspoken messages, and help articulate the total story for the group. This ability to listen and respond appropriately to affective language—both verbal and non-verbal—in the group is key to being competent and worthy of trust. That trust is the foundation of a facilitator's ability to support others as they work through group processes.

Facilitators set norms that establish the tone for interactions and ensure a culture of trust and openness. To do this effectively the facilitator works from a perspective that understands and values such a culture. The critical role here, therefore, is *effective modeling* of the desired behaviors. People will not fully engage in the dialogue and hard work of decision making, problem solving, and planning unless they feel safe, respected and honored. By modeling the behaviors that are expected of the participants, the facilitator provides the context for a trusting and positive environment.

Shifting Point of View – A decision's effectiveness depends on how well it meets the needs of all parts of the system. Therefore, good decisions require that group members understand each other's needs and viewpoints. Where this level of understanding is not immediately present, it falls to the facilitator to recognize and articulate those needs in ways the group members can understand. Facilitators help groups free themselves from internal obstacles or difficulties so that they can pursue their goals (Kayser, 1990, p. 12), which requires the facilitator to work from a clear perspective that values and incorporates each participant's view.

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The first in the skill set is the ability to *feel empathy* and communicate those feelings to others. While this may be difficult because of the requirement for the facilitator to remain objective in the process, it calls on the facilitator to observe and interpret emotions and involvements without being entangled in them. There may be competing or opposing needs and visions that the facilitator has to understand and communicate effectively. There may be painful or hurtful issues that must be addressed. The successful facilitator is able to deal with those feelings and emotions in responsive ways and then communicate them to other members of the group.

Additionally, different personalities and needs in the group may cause cognitive dissonance among members. Asking an individual to think about an issue from another person's point of view may bring out feelings of anger, fear, ambiguity, or confusion. Effective facilitators *watch for indications* of those feelings and help people get past them so that everyone can participate in the process in meaningful ways.

Flexibility is another skill that is developed when a facilitator holds this perspective. The ability to change and move with the group enables the facilitator to shift views as needed while working through the process. Rigidity can potentially bring the decision making to a halt quickly and may do so in ways that can be damaging to the process and to the group itself.

A facilitator whose perspective allows for a shifting point of view is skilled at *accommodating diversity*, regardless of its source. Differences in language, background, socioeconomic levels, experiences—all types of differences color the participants' views coming into decision making and dictate what they will need as an outcome of the process. Facilitators who are sensitive to and accommodate for these differences show their respect for participants and will be better able to engage them in the work to be done.

The final skill in this set is the ability to *engage effectively in the process of inquiry*. Facilitators cannot rely solely on intuition to know what ideas and viewpoints are present in the group or what the people around the table need, think, or feel. When facilitators operate from a perspective of inquiry, they reflect on the needs and direction of the group and articulate questions designed to gather needed information. Then they are able to answer these questions by engaging the group in ongoing dialogue and by observing and listening deeply to discover answers. This attitude of inquiry grows from a curiosity about the individuals and their system, and it reaps valuable information about how that system works. Effective facilitators use this information then to feed it back into the system to inform decision-making processes.

Discerning Patterns – In human systems, patterns of behavior or outcomes can be detected over time, if an individual stands with a perspective that sees those patterns. This skill is critical to working successfully in human systems because of the information it provides about past performance and likeliness of success in the future. The old saying

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that "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results," is appropriate in this skill set. The patterns of behaviors and outcomes tell a story to the discerning observer, and that story is valuable to the group. This perspective allows the facilitator to give that gift to the group and to provide its members with feedback that individual members may not be able to see objectively.

A critical nuance in this perspective is the *ability to deal with the subtleties* of human nature. The facilitator must be able to identify similarities as well as differences in the behaviors, attitudes, and actions of a group. Working from this perspective, facilitators increase their chances of identifying the connections that exist in a group or that need to exist to assure optimal functioning. Watching for and responding to those subtle behaviors and attitudes is possible only for those who discern patterns behaviors, conversations, and issues in the room.

A skill that is not often considered, but is critical within this perspective is the ability to *review a process or pattern to determine its completeness*. Highly effective facilitators who are able to discern patterns view a system across time and space and depend on clues that are not readily observable. The ability to help the members of a group know when they have explored all aspects of an issue or when they are missing a critical element depends on a perspective that allows the facilitator to see the patterns at work in the situation. The ability to project the whole from the parts and to review that whole for completeness is a part of the skills that enable a facilitator to discern the patterns in the system and to make decisions about them.

All of these skills lead the facilitator to questions that determine the steps to take to provide the greatest support to the decision-making process. What are those subtle differences and how do they play themselves out in the working of the group? What individuals or groups have special connections—either positive or not—with other individuals or groups, and how will that influence the work that is being done? What has happened in the past and what is happening now, and how does that difference change projections for tomorrow? How will the group know when their work is finished or that they have addressed all the aspects of an issue? These and other critical questions can only be answered if the facilitator is able to discern patterns in the system. Additional benefit is derived if the facilitator is able to articulate this line of thinking for the group and engage them in identifying patterns and incorporating that knowledge into the discussion.

Generating Options – Often people engaged in decision making are unable to see multiple options that may be available to them. This may be due to their proximity to the problems; they may not have the knowledge or expertise needed to know further options; or they may not, as a group, have the creativity to be able to imagine other ways of existing. The members of the organization may be locked in—too close to an existing structure that works at some levels and opposed to leaving it. However, their need for change requires breaking old patterns of past behavior so that they can move

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forward in their decision making. It is one task of the facilitator to assure that a group has a variety of options available from which the participants can choose. This requires that the facilitator have a perspective that is *creative and imaginative in describing future states.*

However, facilitators who create impossible options or unrealistic expectations for the participants are acting irresponsibly and can cause significant damage within the system. To prevent such a situation, the facilitator must also have experience in the area that the decision making is addressing, or work very closely with someone who does. Any creative, out-of-the-box options should be checked against experience to determine their viability. Another tool that facilitators use in assuring that their generated options are possible is the cost-benefit analysis. Regardless of the apparent viability of an option, if it costs more than it brings to the system, it should be carefully reconsidered.

Evaluating Outcomes – Decision-making processes are useless if they do not bring about desired outcomes, and it is the job of the facilitator to guide the group in determining what those desired outcomes are and how they will be measured. This perspective allows the facilitator to see the value in simple, yet complete, evaluation measures. From this perspective, evaluation is neither punitive nor arbitrary. It is merely a tool that supports a group in knowing how they are progressing toward their desired outcomes at any given point in time.

Facilitators have to be able to help the group *develop simple, measurable outcomes*. Unlike process outcomes that can merely be checked off on a "to do" list, measurable outcomes are never as simple as "yes-no" outcomes. In working toward improvement, systems increase their productivity and effectiveness in measurable increments. While these increments can sometimes be large, other times they may be very small. Effective facilitators are skilled at using the concepts of measurement and evaluation to identify the indicators of success and the measures that relate to them. They are able to help the group identify the measures to use and then put in place a system whereby the data can be collected and analyzed. They provide effective coaching in this area and assure that the members of the system understand the need for consistency and comparability in measurement.

Finally, it is most important that the facilitator maintain a degree of objectivity and coach members of the group in maintaining that same objectivity in their measurements. Evaluation of outcomes must produce valid and reliable measures, and that requires that data be collected in non-biased and replicable ways.

Cognitive Perspectives

The behaviors of effective facilitators are easy to observe and recognize. However those behavioral habits represent the cognitive processing that is guiding the work. My "expert

facilitator" and I began to explore the areas of cognitive processing that guide her work with groups and individuals. What are the conceptual foundations that guide her actions? What we identified we refer to as cognitive perspectives, and they include:

► Seeing dimensionality

► Comprehending systems

► Considering dynamics

► Balancing reductionist thinking

As we talked about them, my colleague and I realized that these perspectives are more conceptual and developmental in nature than those that relate to behaviors. This makes them more complex in their application and use as a defining structure. It is more difficult to identify their behavioral implications and to assess where an individual performs on a developmental scale in a given area. Additionally, it requires a different type of learning experience to support a person's growth through those processes.

Seeing Dimensionality – This perspective gives the ability to see and *deal with many dimensions of an issue simultaneously.* Often in problem-solving activities, people tend to think along one line and fail to consider multiple aspects of an issue. For example, when asked how a new person is doing on the job, the supervisor may tell you that the person is not working out. When asked to explain, the supervisor states that the individual is not performing the work well enough. When pushed for further details, the supervisor says that the person is not doing standard work. This supervisor is not considering the various dimensions of this person's situation. If, on the other hand, the supervisor had explained that the person's typing skills were not what was needed, and that the person who left the job previously had not stayed to do the on-the- job training, and that this individual had taken several personal leave days immediately after having taken the position, it would be obvious that this person is able to consider the various dimensions of the issue. Seeing the various dimensions of an issue is about seeing the causality involved, and the multiple "causes" of any situation.

The dynamics present in human systems make them multi-layered, complex and massively entangled, leaving its individual parts vulnerable to influences at work in other areas—or dimensions. Facilitators who lack the perspective of dimensionality are doomed to create solutions that are self-defeating and short-lived. Often the individuals who are working within the system cannot see or understand all the dimensions that may be at work at a given point in time or in a given situation. It is the facilitator's responsibility *to guide the group in identifying those dimensions* and in exploring the impacts across the system. What are all of the causes that brought the system to the point at which it now stands?

The developmental nature of this competency requires that the individual understand

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causality and the results of increasing numbers of variables in problem solving and decision making. Successful facilitators understand this developmental process and guide the participants in their growth in understanding the dimensionality of a system.

Comprehending Complex Adaptive Systems – People who work to solve problems and make decisions in systems must first *understand the nature of complex adaptive systems (CAS)* and how to use that understanding in their work. The field of study that addresses these questions of how people work and play effectively in complex adaptive systems is called human systems dynamics. It is based on foundational understandings.

- ► A system is created to accomplish a task and a number of characteristics can influence its work.

- ► Sub-systems may accomplish parts of the task or activities that support the ultimate outcome of the system.

- ► Parts of a system are interdependent, and steps taken in one part are likely to influence the functioning in another part.

- ► Systems exist in real time and space and so are subject to the influences of the day-to-day shifts that may occur among its parts.

- ► Systems are not closed to outside forces and must be able to respond to their environments.

Beyond these characteristics, there are points to keep in mind about human systems, which belong in a special class called complex adaptive systems (CAS).

- ► A CAS is a collection of individual agents, who have the freedom to act in unpredictable ways, and whose actions are interconnected such that they produce system-wide patterns.

- ► Self-similar patterns appear at multiple levels of scale, so what the facilitator is seeing at one level in the session may be "scaled" or replicated at other points in the organization.

- ► Small—or seemingly small—events may cause some unexpectedly large effects.

- ► Whether they are articulated by the group or not, simple rules generate complex, coherent behaviors. This is the essence of the culture in a group. What rules govern the day-to-day behavioral patterns?

- ► Patterns of behavior emerge over time. Facilitators have to look at the organization over time, they cannot just consider today's "snapshot."

A system is greater than the sum of its parts. Together these interdependent parts are able to accomplish more than any of them would if left to function independently.

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Facilitators have to be able to *understand this critical notion to see the greater functioning of the systems* in which they work.

Often in an organization, people understand their roles, but while they may recognize and value the roles of other groups, they may not appreciate how the two are connected and interdependent. This is the developmental nature of this perspective. Groups who have a limited view of the work in their organization need to be guided in understanding the system in which they work and its interdependent nature.

All of this is very basic, but often people who work in a system don't understand these concepts and how they influence their lives every day. Effective facilitators are *sensitive to the level of systems understanding* that exists in the group and take whatever steps are necessary to help the participants understand their own systems better. Good decisions cannot be made in a system if those tenets are not considered.

Considering Dynamics – Systems are dynamical entities. They do not exist in a vacuum; nor are they static. As pointed out in the last section, a system exists in real time and is subject to time-based changes that occur inside its boundaries as well as in its external environment. Understanding dynamics is like seeing and valuing the different insights that can be gained from a snapshot and from a moving picture. Snapshots give a glimpse of the functioning at any discreet point in time—no more and no less. On the other hand, the dynamic nature of moving pictures provides a sense of ongoing functioning of the system. The changing economic picture, shifting social expectations, the varied landscape of the current political environment—all of these operate in dynamic ways to influence the relationships and functioning within a human system.

Facilitators must *understand and be able to communicate this concept* to participants so that they can use those insights as they work. Effective decisions cannot be made without considering this dynamical nature. Facilitators must continue, throughout the decision-making process, to keep this perspective at the forefront of the group's thinking. When a planning group is outlining interventions or developing effectiveness measures, the passage of time and the changing environment must be considered. What might be indicative of success in today's market may not be enough to satisfy the same market in a few weeks. Interventions that might prove effective today may not be tolerated by the system in future days. Ongoing questions about the system's changes over time are critical to the success of any group in that system.

Balancing Reductionist Thinking – Given the nature of traditional problem-solving and decision-making processes, most individuals approach a task by first breaking it into its basic steps or parts and addressing those pieces as discreet. This is reductionist thinking.

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However that approach is not as productive when working within a complex system. It is not enough because of the various characteristics of the system such as dimensionality and the dynamic nature of systems. Problems or issues within the system must be addressed in the context of the total system. Those who are working on those problems and issues have to be able to think in that context as well.

That is the essence of this final cognitive perspective—balancing reductionist thinking. Individuals who want to facilitate processes in human systems must be able to *balance the tendency to engage in reductionist thinking with thinking that sees the system as a whole,* seeing both the parts and the whole as they work.

They must be able to "zoom in" in their thinking to see the specifics at work in the system and then "zoom out" to see the generalizations of those specifics. They need to be able to think about the individual, discreet steps and outcomes in a process as well as the total process as a system of steps. And they must be able to do this while working with and meeting the needs of a group of individuals and in the context of the issues at hand.

Even more important than being able to do this is the ability to do it as a conscious, deliberate action. When working with groups who are not seeing the "total" picture, it is easy to get swept away in their enthusiasm and vision. However, facilitators are responsible for assuring that the big-picture considerations are included in the process and that the group members maintain that vision as well.

Conclusion

The work it takes to be an excellent, world-class facilitator is complex and challenging. Effective facilitators will see their own skills and perspectives in these descriptions. Many people have intuitively known to pay attention to the behavioral skill areas that are outlined here. In fact, training and certification programs for facilitation focus on many of these skills. However, it is clear that in the role of the facilitator, understanding complex adaptive systems and applying that knowledge in helping people work together effectively are critical. These are the foundations upon which appropriate actions are built. This is what sets this list apart from competency-based descriptors of effective facilitation practices.

Whether an individual has ever had any training in human systems dynamics and complex adaptive systems, facilitation is a job that requires that person to work successfully with human systems. People who come together to work on an issue—whether it is problem solving, decision making or planning—make up a system that is geared to accomplish that work. People work in organizations, and the problems or issues that come from them are systems based. The perspectives identified in this paper are the basis of the understandings that are required for a facilitator to work most effectively with those systems issues.

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So what happens next with this list? It is a beginning. This delineation is an attempt to articulate—on a conscious level—what world-class facilitators do intuitively. They represent a step toward further defining the training and development that will give all facilitators and leaders the skills they need to work effectively with the humans who are making decisions and solving problems in dynamic systems every day.

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Table 1. Behavioral Perspectives and Accompanying Skill Sets

Area	Definition	Discussion
Behavioral Perspectives	The perspectives required to be able to take the steps necessary to support a group in working to address a "system" issue.	Each perspective depends on a set of discreet skills that can be studied and/or taught.
Building Relationships	Ability to build a sense of trust between one's self and others as well as ability to build a sense of trust within a group by creating a safe, open environment.	▶ Deep Listening ▶ Building trust ▶ Using patience ▶ Negotiating
Shifting Point of View	Ability to see an issue from multiple perspectives and ability to articulate those perspectives in ways that enable others to see beyond their own points of view.	▶ Feeling empathy ▶ Exhibiting flexibility ▶ Showing understanding
Discerning Patterns	Ability to see patterns of behavior or outcomes, both as they emerge in a process and as they manifest themselves in the past experiences of the group.	▶ Identifying similarities ▶ Identifying differences ▶ Identifying connections within the group ▶ Observing across time ▶ Using effective outcomes measures ▶ Reviewing for completeness
Generating Options	Ability to work with a group to identify creative and possible options for solutions that go beyond the most obvious alternatives.	▶ Exhibiting flexibility ▶ Using imagination and creativity ▶ Having expertise in the field (or access to) ▶ Using Cost-benefit analysis
Evaluating Outcomes	Ability to use formal and informal data collection to assess the current functioning of a group against a stated desired performance.	▶ Articulating desired outcomes ▶ Maintaining objectivity ▶ Using effective measurement ▶ Providing effective coaching ▶ Assuring consistency

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Table 2. Cognitive Perspectives and Accompanying Skill Sets

Area	Definition	Discussion
Cognitive Perspectives	These perspectives must be considered as "system" issues are discussed and decisions are made.	Each perspective is conceptual and developmental in nature and should be considered in that light.
Seeing Dimensionality	Ability to understand the various dimensions at work at any given time in a situation, as well as the impact those dimensions might have on the functioning of the system.	Individual sees causality in the system. First with linear variables, then with paired non-linear variables.
Comprehending Systems	Ability to see the parts of the system and understand their interrelationships and dependencies within that system.	Individual understands complex systems and can use that thinking to consider interdependencies and strengths in the system as changes occur.
Considering Dynamics	Ability to understand and consider a system's movement and change across time while engaging in decision making.	Individual sees shifts in the environment as the system moves through time and considers the impacts of other actions on the functioning of the system in future time.
Balancing Reductionist Thinking	Ability to move between the reductionist perspective—understanding the parts of the system—and the summative perspective—understanding the whole is greater than the sum of the parts—to use that understanding of the system in decision making.	Individual is able to engage in thinking that includes concepts like whole-to-part, general-to-specific, beginning-to-end, etc.

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