

Insights from the Stillpoint

Facilitating better outcomes

October 2023



Success in life, as in politics, depends on compromise. Peace, social progress, relationships and individual happiness all require some kind of accommodation with others and the world around us.

Facilitation has been called the 'art of the possible', a phrase first attributed to Otto von Bismarck in relation to politics, but equally applicable to the facilitator's task of bringing divergent views together to create a unifying vision for the future.

I've been a facilitator for 30 years, and it's not an easy job. To be a good facilitator you need to be able to listen deeply, have highly developed intuition and the ability to 'read' a room, foster trust in a group, work constructively with conflict, think on your feet and respond rapidly to changing dynamics and circumstances.

Why do I love it? Because when facilitation works well, groups make better decisions. People gain understanding as a team and as individuals, and they communicate together in more open and authentic ways.

According to the International Association of Facilitators (IAF), "facilitators are called upon to fill an impartial role in helping groups become more effective. We act as process guides to create a balance between participation and results."

Facilitation is both an art and a science, as noted by Marsha Acker in her book of the same name. It is an art, because it is a creative and performative process, requiring skill and technical knowledge. A facilitator must bring a stance of openness, humility, respect and trust. Through the use of processes designed to foster open communication, facilitators create a constructive space for a group to have difficult conversations that may otherwise not occur.

Facilitation is also a science because it is underpinned by a strong foundation of research and practice from disciplines such as psychology, sociology, education, and management. Facilitators design processes using theories of group dynamics, communication and behavioural psychology in order to guide groups through reflective processes to decision-making.

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The IAF has identified a range of core competencies that are the hallmark of quality facilitators, including the ability to design, plan and execute group processes, interpersonal communication skills, and self-reflective practice.

Facilitation can lead to better outcomes by creating a safe environment for interpersonal engagement. This environment, sustained by facilitative leadership, can lead to improved communication and collaboration, create clarity and consensus, resolve conflict and increase opportunities for diverse views to be heard. Effective group interaction can improve time efficiency, quality of decision-making, and accountability for future actions; it can also help to identify and articulate cognitive biases and 'groupthink', allowing groups to become aware of hidden barriers to success.

Facilitators must always be alert and attuned to the nuances of group dynamics and able to respond flexibly to whatever emerges within a group. Jay Vogt of Peoplesworth has noted that while meetings are often considered to be a waste of time, most of us who work in teams still spend a lot of time in meetings (check out his TED Talk which outlines how facilitation can transform meetings and outcomes).

The news media is filled with examples of tension and conflict around the world. At all levels from nations to neighbourhoods, we can see what happens when people are unable to resolve their differences or find solutions to shared problems. At the same time, our common future relies on humans finding ways to work and live together. The more we can do this in the affairs of our daily lives, the better equipped we will be to deal with national or global challenges.

To set aside the present to imagine the future requires risk, vulnerability, trust and a move away from dualistic thinking. Better outcomes often require a guide to lead through the challenges to the possibilities. A skilled facilitator is able to do just that. You can find a facilitator through the IAF on their website, or contact me at Stillpoint Strategy.

Linda

