

# Lessons from group facilitation

By Brian Watts 28/7/13

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## **How awareness of group dynamics can substantially add to coaching**

There is much similarity between the practice of 1-1 coaching and group facilitation. Active listening, rapport, and effective questioning each build to a common skill set. Couple this with a commitment to learning and an intention to empower the client and one would be forgiven for viewing them as synonymous.

In this article I shall explore the way that facilitators from a humanistic tradition gather learning from the prevailing group dynamic, and consider how this approach may enrich ones coaching practice.

## **Where is the difference**

Much group facilitation, and probably all work based teams will have clear tasks to achieve. However, alongside these business outcomes the facilitator is also handling the interplay of relationships between group members. If achieving a team task may be likened to a ship navigating into a port, then the group dynamic is the sea through which the ship has to navigate. Just as the sea conditions will influence the progress of the ship, so group dynamics will influence the achievement of tasks. Skilled group facilitators do more than merely manage the dynamics, they utilise them.

By group dynamics we mean the way that individuals orient themselves in relation to one-another. It is the realm of assumptions, attitudes, social norms, feelings and needs. Often these qualities go unsaid but tend to leak out in nonverbal behaviour and asides. Facilitators working at this level raise awareness of the behaviour patterns, and draw attention to those that are counter-productive or otherwise limiting. Their rationale is twofold. First, to better achieve the task if it is being held back in some way. And second, to help teams learn about their less aware behaviours thus leading to future effectiveness and wellbeing.

The complexity is further compounded because the group facilitator is also *in* the group and brings their own personal story to it. Effective group facilitators are able to handle group behaviours whilst also attending to their own reactions as they arise. And this all happens whilst remaining focussed on the task.

How then is this managed? Here are some key aspects that may be incorporated into coaching practice.

## **Know your Role**

If the focus of facilitation may be crudely divided between task and process, then it follows that the facilitator is to balance two related roles and to flow between them in a timely and appropriate manner.

The first is that of *Group Facilitator*. Here attention is given to clarifying the purpose and the working method. It includes ensuring equality of contribution, managing time, pace, and recording information. This role is frequently seen in agenda led business meetings. It is a necessary role, but of itself will rarely get below the surface of the group.

The second is that of *Process Facilitator*. Here attention is given to what is going on in the group, actively noticing the quality of interaction, listening for what is not being said, and being vigilant of unhelpful behaviour patterns. By supportively raising awareness, individuals will better understand *how* they are working together. This increases the skill set of participants and builds towards greater productivity in the future.

### **Know your Self**

Being in the role of facilitator can evoke anxieties that may diminish performance. A common Achilles heel for facilitators is to become either too controlling or too laissez faire. Will Schutz<sup>1</sup> helpfully relates this to feelings of competence and the classic response to anxiety of fight or flight. Knowing what triggers unhelpful behaviour, is crucial for being authentic and cooperative in style.

### **Cooperative Style**

Working in a genuinely cooperative manner empowers, it encourages responsibility and self-management. Here the facilitator is alongside the group, not looked to as the font of all knowledge, but helping the group to find its own collective wisdom. Ultimately, cooperative methods enable teams to enter the performing phase of group development<sup>2</sup>.

### **Spirit of Inquiry**

The fast paced nature of business can work against the need to slow down, and the pressure to make quick decisions can close a profitable opportunity for reflection. This can be short sighted, as Peter Senge<sup>3</sup> observes, time is the first enemy of change. A spirit of inquiry is not a naval gazing activity. Rather, it is about boldness, having enough courage to shift focus and to ask what is really going on. From such openness fresh agendas and renewed creativity can emerge.

### **Application to Coaching**

A solo performer in a theatre may appear to be alone, but in the background are a host of people who complement the performance through lighting, sound, and scenery. Imagine watching the performance whilst also being mindful that others are operating the stage set. Based on the cues that you observe in the performance, your imagination will guide you to appreciate that there is a team at work. If you were to ask the actor about their performance, you might now broaden your questions to understand the rest of the team. Although you haven't seen them, they have none-the-less participated and co-created the performance.

Similarly, when coaching an individual, one can tune into the groups or teams that the client is part of. Effective coaching appropriately shifts focus between the individual

and the group, yet without losing sight of either. The coach exercises curiosity and intuition to hunch at what might be happening in the system, behind the scenes.

### Focus of questions

Given that the team is subtly present in the coaching relationship, the area of focus will determine the type of inquiry that the coach makes. For example,

Individual Focus	Group Focus
What do you want to achieve?	What expectations are upon you?
What are your possible courses of action?	What impact do your actions have on others?
How will you gain 'buy in'?	Is 'buy in' important for the team?
What are you feeling right now?	What might you be acting out on behalf of the team?
Describe the problem that you identified?	What is this problem a symptom of?

Apart from the obvious learning and development that takes place when considering groups, there are two significant benefits.

### Identifying the source of problems

Particularly when working with relational problems and strong reactions, clients can better understand the source of that problem and identify appropriate solutions. In the Western world we tend to focus primarily on the individual, but responsibility is more often shared. Systems thinking shows us that there are at least three options to choose between.

1. That the problem is mine. I can own it and attend to my actions.
2. That the problem is interpersonal. It is shared, we have co-created it, we need to skilfully resolve it together.
3. That the problem is systemic. It's not about me, it's in the culture. I may not be able to change it, but I can adjust my relationship to it.

### Wellbeing in the workplace

Often our true experience in groups goes unsaid and can have a negative impact. Being able to understand the impact has a restorative effect. A recent coaching client who is a medical doctor in the NHS was experiencing high levels of stress due to the competing demands of patient care and business administration. He was stressed largely due to his belief that he lacked personal capacity and that it was his problem to fix. It took very little time to explore the systemic issues of capacity building in the NHS. By understanding his place in the system, and what Morgan<sup>4</sup> describes as organisational oppression, he was able to realign himself to the problem. Accordingly his wellbeing increased, and this had a positive effect on others in the organisation. I'm convinced that a search for personal capacity building would not have been so fruitful.

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<sup>1</sup> Schutz, W. *The Human Element*: Jossey-Bass, 1994

<sup>2</sup> Tuckman, B., and Jensen, M. *Stages of Group Development Revisited*: Sage Publications, 1977

<sup>3</sup> Senge, P. *The Dance of Change: A Fifth Discipline Resource*, 1999

<sup>4</sup> Morgan, G. *Images of Organization*: Sage Publications, 1997