



Value

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What does it take to be a successful facilitator? (and other such questions)

In special theme this Issue

Soft VM skills

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'Soft Foundations'

By Pat Young¹

¹ Pat is the proprietor of Learning Edge Consulting who have been training Facilitators in soft skills facilitation, group dynamics and group process facilitation since 1987. He has extensive business and management experience and has worked as a consultant for many organisations in the public and private sector. Pat trained in group process facilitation at the University of Surrey [1987-1989]. His experience includes facilitating Post Graduate Diplomas in Humanistic Psychology and Group Process Facilitation at the University of Surrey [1992-1994] and the University of Bath [1998-2000]. He was an Associate Facilitator on the Human Potential Research Project at the University of Surrey 1989 - 1995, facilitating groups on the open programme for personal and professional development. Learning Edge Consulting runs regular open programmes on group process facilitator training and in FIRO Theory, including qualifying programmes in the associated psychometric instruments in West Sussex.

When a group of people meet together, a psychological process is created which has an impact on what happens in the group. This process is often unconscious and occurs regardless of the purpose of the meeting and whether or not the participants have met before. The common name for this process is 'the group dynamic', or the 'group process'. These terms are used as a shorthand to describe the interactions and relationships between the members of the group. Every member of a group is subject to this group process. When the group process is managed well the group has the potential to become highly effective. When it is not managed the group is far less likely to achieve its aspirations.

Various writers have identified certain stages of group development. For example Tuckman [1965] originally posited four stages of group development: Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing. The last stage 'Performing' is what should happen when the group successfully negotiates the preceding stages.

One of the most useful aspects of group process is its consistency and its ubiquitousness. This makes the job of the facilitator much easier - rather than having to guess what is going on we simply have to learn, remember and become aware of what part of the process a group has reached, at any given moment in time.

To facilitate my own awareness of group process I constantly refer to Will Schutz' FIRO (Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation) Theory [Schutz 1958]. This is a unified theory of individual and group interaction which has the added benefit of being easy to grasp and apply.

The theory states that each of us has a fundamental preference for the ways in which we relate to others and for how we like others to relate to us based on our behaviour in each of the three dimensions of Inclusion, Control and Openness.

It is worth remembering at this point that a group is two or more persons and therefore the group dynamic applies just as much to 'one to one' relations, eg coach

and coachee, as it does to larger groups. At the risk of stating the obvious, it is also worth remembering that we as facilitators are also part of, and subject to, the group process.

Briefly, Schutz tells us that there are three dimensions of interaction and relationships that each person in each group needs to attend to in order to be successful in their relationships, accomplishments and interactions together. If these dimensions are traversed and attended to according to the preferences of each individual the resulting relationships are far more likely to be cordial, successful, longer lasting, higher performing and more satisfactory than if we fail to traverse the dimensions, or if, as can all too often happen, we get stuck in one of them.

One of the ways Schutz uses to describe the three dimensions of his approach is to talk of the concerns or issues we have when we gather together in a group. These issues apply whenever we meet together - not just for example the first time we

might happen to join a particular group. These issues and concerns also apply to every group we might be part of. In other words our work groups, project teams, social groups, friends, clubs, teams and of course our families. FIRO Theory is claimed by Schutz to be universal, my own experiences certainly seem to support this. The dimensions are hierarchical, they always occur in the same order. Individual behaviour will tend to alter subtly depending upon which particular dimension we are 'in' at any given time and on whether our personal needs in that area are being met or frustrated. Groups will tend to cycle through the dimensions many times in the course of each group meeting.

The first dimension concerns our involvement and interaction, this is the extent we wish to include ourselves in the relationship and the extent to which we wish to be included by the others in the relationship. Inclusion behaviours tend to be social in nature, they involve greetings, introductions, catching up with people, in other words involving ourselves with each other. Some of us like a lot of inclusion while others like much less!

In a group where our wishes

and preferences for inclusion are similar we are likely to deal with this dimension easily and thus be able to move on to the next dimension. However, if my needs for inclusion are low and your needs are high, then my behaviour around inclusion could lead you to feel ignored by me and this might lead to some friction in our relationship. On the other hand if my needs for inclusion are higher than your needs in the same dimension my behaviour might lead you to feel very exposed and more involved than you might wish.

In any given group the participants are likely to have a pretty wide range of preferences for the amount of inclusion they ideally want. For example, in a group of eighteen trainee facilitators which I was facilitating recently the range of preferences for inclusion ran from 2 to 9 on a scale of 0 to 9. It became clear that some members of the group preferred just a little inclusion whilst others preferred a great deal of inclusion. In this particular case there were two, pretty strong and outspoken group participants who were both low on inclusion. As a result of this they wanted to hurry us along and 'get down to business' almost immediately, feeling that the preliminary group activities

were a complete waste of time. The problem here is that if we had hurried along and got down to business immediately, we ran the risk of those in the group who preferred more inclusion feeling ignored, not listened to and possibly even alienated from the proceedings. When group participants feel ignored it naturally affects how they participate, many such participants will be inclined to withdraw their involvement, while others may be more vociferous and complain that they are never listened to. When our inclusions needs are not met we can easily feel that our involvement is not valued.

Once the inclusion dimension is dealt with the group begins to move into the second dimension, where participants become concerned with whether or not they will have any influence on the proceedings. Schutz called this the control dimension. It is where we wonder and sometimes worry whether or not we will be able to have any influence on what happens and transpires. Whether we will be able to exert any control over the group or whether we will be controlled by the group. Like inclusion there are likely to be a range of preferences for control in any given group ranging from low to high.

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Soft Foundations *By Pat Young*

When the group feels that it is safe to be open they can be facilitated to resolve their issues...

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Facilitators who decide to develop their awareness in these areas will usually gain more leverage.

Some group members will be very happy to go with the flow, quite content to be influenced whereas others will prefer to be much more directive and will wish to influence the group.

If my needs for control are high and your needs are low, we might well work happily together, however, if we are both high in our preferences for control we run the risk of engaging in a power struggle, tussling to see who has the most influence, or the best ideas, potentially causing disruption in the group. If on the other hand we are both low on control we run the risk of not getting anything done as we may both be reluctant to make a decision.

The final dimension is the dimension of openness. In the original FIRO Theory this dimension was known as affection. However, Schutz realised that affection was more of a feeling than a behaviour, so in his subsequent development of the theory he renamed the dimension and called it openness. This is where the group members having resolved their needs and wants around inclusion and control become much more intimate with one another. What this means is that they are likely to be open about what they want and don't want, what they like and

dislike and about how they feel about specific issues. In this respect it is analogous to Tuckman's description of performing. However, it is important to note that in the openness dimension groups can be very noisy, and even stormy. Openness might also involve expressions of annoyance, anger, frustration and irritation between group members, perhaps also towards the facilitator and their parent organisation.

When we move to the openness dimension group members have the potential to resolve any differences they may have with each other, and this might not always feel comfortable. In the preceding dimensions the group or some of its members can become stuck. When this happens around inclusion for example, there will be a crisis of involvement. Participants will feel ignored and not listened to, they may express this with statements along the lines of "Why bother? Nobody pays any attention to us" or by disengaging and withdrawing their involvement from the proceedings. When the group gets stuck in the control dimension there will be a crisis of influence, likely to manifest itself in power struggles between group members or between members and the facilitator. If this is the case there could be arguments, point proving

and perhaps direct challenges along the lines of "Do you know what you are talking about?" or "We tried that last year and it never worked then!". When the group feels that it is safe to be open they can be facilitated to resolve their issues, so, although this might at times be uncomfortable, by definition they are not stuck.

The dimensions of inclusion, control and openness concern our basic human needs to be involved with other human beings, to have some influence over our relationships with others and to have appropriate amounts of intimacy with regards to allowing ourselves to be appreciated, seen by and known by others. We all have these needs to a greater or lesser extent. Often when facilitating it is easy to become over concerned with the tasks and procedures and forget about the human needs, the process issues. However, my experience is that when we take the time to attend to the process issues, the tasks and the procedures are often accomplished much more quickly and to a higher standard than if the processes were ignored. Participation in the group is experienced as much more satisfying by more of the participants.

Facilitators who decide to develop their awareness in these areas will usually gain more leverage in their facilitation strategies as well as insight into themselves and the groups they run.

As facilitators, our fundamental preferences for inclusion, control and openness to some extent drive our facilitation. However, because of the very fundamental nature of these preferences, they can have an impact on our facilitation which is out of our awareness, in much the same way as we might wonder if a goldfish is aware of the water in which it exists.

In using FIRO Theory, I am consistently reminded of my own blind spots in the area of inclusion. My own preferences around inclusion are low, therefore, the risk I run when facilitating others whose preferences for inclusion are higher than my own is that I leave them feeling unseen by me and even ignored. Naturally this has a negative impact on the proceedings. I have learned over the years to pay close attention to this dimension because in most of the groups I run participants have higher preferences than myself.

A favourite technique I deploy at the start of an event is to be very open with the

group about the three dimensions and the effects our inevitable differing preferences can have on our aims and objectives, should we fail to take them into consideration. One specific technique is to write the following statements up on a flip chart. I then ask the group participants to take a few moments to reflect on which of the 10 statements most closely represents how they feel at the moment with regards to inclusion. Then I ask them to arrange themselves along an imaginary line on the floor [it need not be imaginary, you can use masking tape to make it vary tangible] with the same scale 0 - 9 and to place themselves at the point on the scale which represents the statement describing their current preference. Each group can then see visually how the individual participants prefer to deal with inclusion. I also find it useful to talk a little bit at this point about what is likely to happen with those in the group who are at opposite ends of the line in their relationship to one another. This exercise illuminates some of the issues around inclusion and by actually engaging with the exercise it attends to many of the needs in the same dimension. Similar exercises can be offered around control and openness.

- 0 - I never include others!
- 1 - I hardly include others at all
- 2 - I will occasionally include others
- 3 - I like the odd bit of socialising
- 4 - I usually enjoy meeting people
- 5 - I like including people
- 6 - I have a busy social life
- 7 - I have a wide circle of friends
- 8 - I'm a party animal
- 9 - I include everybody

It should be pointed out that this scale is not a substitute for any of the FIRO instruments.

When we manage to facilitate the conditions where group participants can attend to their needs in the three dimensions they are likely to feel that they are adding value to the proceedings, to perceive that they have influence and are able to exercise this to some extent, and have a sense of their own acceptance by, and commitment to, the group. When this happens the tasks and procedures can be dealt with much more effectively. The challenge is that these process issues take time, for example in a three day group, I will typically take half of the first day to facilitate the group through inclusion, control and hopefully into openness. The rewards for this are that the group inevitably achieves more of its objectives because participants for the most part are engaged, involved, present and contributing fully to the event.

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