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# The Role of Facilitation in Praxis

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# **The Role of Facilitation in Praxis**

## **Executive Summary**

The application of facilitation in organizational life has become so popular that it has been co-opted in some quarters as a basis for defining the managerial role. Although it has attributes that can be applied to human interactions across and within organizations, its practice is delimited within group settings as assisting members to accomplish their goals through a focus on process rather than on content. Within the world of praxis, which focuses on settings in which there is an explicit attempt to learn from reflection on action, facilitation is further defined as embodying a reflective practice that is concurrent with and critical of experience. In this article, facilitation will be characterized as a means of bringing out learning for both self and others within team settings. The account will review some of the explicit skills and interventions that facilitators need to deploy when the focus of attention is on praxis rather than on task accomplishment.

## Introduction

The practice of facilitation has been spreading across our organizational landscape to nearly every group setting in which the purpose is to improve team functioning. Boards, top management teams, quality teams, labor-management committees, cross-functional task forces, project teams, and community action groups all may look to facilitation as a base of support in getting their work done more effectively. Facilitation has also crept into our everyday organizational practices as a method of leadership.

Although facilitation methods vary, there are some common principles and practices that distinguish facilitation from, say, meeting management or group therapy. A review of some of the classics of group behavior as well as of popular accounts of facilitation, including a plethora of resources available through the International Association of Facilitators (IAF), delimits facilitation as focusing on process rather than on content. The root definition of facilitation is “to make easy;” thus, group facilitators provide assistance, not control, making it easy for the group to do its work.

Most of the literature also calls for the facilitator to take a neutral stance on the content of the discussion in order to help the group free itself from internal obstacles that may be hampering effective decision-making. As a servant to the group, the facilitator has one goal – to help the group achieve its purpose by assisting the participants in having a constructive dialogue, as free as possible from internal dynamics that may block productive discourse.

In this article, I wish to claim that facilitation within the context of “praxis,” defined as a venue in which there is an attempt to learn from practice, requires a further delimitation – since the focus of the dialogue tends to be on learning rather than on task accomplishment. Before specifying how facilitation should be constituted in this context, I will first define what praxis refers to, especially in the setting

known as the learning team. I will next consider the range of motion of facilitation when learning becomes the principal goal. I then turn to facilitation that probes to a deeper level of discourse that can be described as emancipatory or critical. In this setting, facilitators engage their teams in a search for validity of understanding that can lead as much to self-transformation as to system change. The account will conclude with a description of five advanced facilitator skills that are especially appropriate within the domain of praxis.

### **What is Praxis?**

In this article, I maintain that facilitation within a context of praxis should be of a different nature than facilitation associated with familiar task or project settings. What is praxis? Derived from the Greek word for “action,” it refers not only to what one does, but also to how one thinks about what one and others do. In this sense, praxis is intimately concerned with learning and reflection. By thinking about what one does in practice, one does more than just accumulate knowledge. As Karl Marx noted, praxis is an active and interdependent process which links the human mind with the external world through activity with others.

Praxis has also been associated with critical theory, not because praxis is interested in changing the social order per se, but because it is a dialectical method that can bridge the theory-practice and object-subject gaps. In so doing, it can promote human integrity, freedom, and transformation through its recognition of the adaptability of human nature. Thus, praxis can be a liberating process, to the extent that it results in challenges that bring out contradictions in the current power structure.

The epistemological stance of praxis is that of a bridge between theory and practice. It is often thought that it is the process of reflection that brings theory to light, but reflection’s effect on practice may remain stagnant without actuation in the form of praxis. Thus, praxis can be particularized by its

interactive nature. Its interactive nature, in turn, leads to its focus on that which is contemporaneous and critical.

Contemporaneous reflection: Most practitioners choose to bring out their reflections with others once they become absorbed in practice. Their internal dialogue is enhanced by external dialogue that induces and then refines it. In other words, we create ways of learning in practice in the very process of contributing to making that practice what it is. Praxis' interactive property resonated with Socrates who had the idea of relationships in mind when he remarked that: "...the unexamined life isn't worth living." This phrase has often been misinterpreted as a call for additional introspection. The actual meaning is that we need to include trusted others in the examination of experience in our life. Jürgen Habermas, a contemporary German philosopher from the Frankfurt School, believes a reconciliation between the individual and society can be achieved through intersubjective recognition based on mutual understanding and free cognition about disputed claims. It is through communicative action that we are able to realize ourselves within a civic community. We must subject our entire experience to criticism, even our tacit understanding.

Praxis is as much concerned, then, with reflection in the here-and-now as it is with reflection before or after the experience. In the midst of performance, one learns to reframe unanticipated problems in order to see experience differently. For example, in the middle of a planning meeting, a team member might offer an image, use humor to describe a puzzling feature, attempt to bring out someone's prior opinion, or turn a problem upside down to free up the team to consider some new approaches.

Critical reflection: As was suggested at the outset of this section, praxis is often associated with critical agendas because of its potential to review and alter misconstrued meanings found in conventional wisdom or in power relationships. It is a form of "heedful" action in which actors attentively and conscientiously take into consideration data beyond their personal, interpersonal, and organizational assumptions. We

need to understand how knowledge has been constructed and managed. We need to understand how what is deemed to be relevant or even commonsense has been arrived at. For example, we may assume that everyone has the psychological security of reflecting with others, but in fact this may not be the case for marginalized individuals or groups who may be uninvited to the table. We need to elucidate the barriers preventing learners from finding their voices or reaching their potential. We may also change ourselves as we identify and address the social, political, and cultural conditions that constrain self-insight.

### **Learning Teams**

The principal vehicle for participating in group praxis is the learning team. Learning teams assemble practitioners who wish to slow down sufficiently to reflect together on their individual and team goals. Learning team members may choose to meet exclusively as a self-contained team or could choose to occasionally meet as a learning team while concurrently participating together in another team capacity, such as a project team.

Learning teams can form as adjuncts to formal training and development programs or as spontaneous communities of practice. Although their derivation is subject to debate, they likely got their start as intrinsic components of action learning programs. Thus, it is important, prior to offering any further description of learning teams, to say a word about action learning.

Action learning describes an educational approach, typically applied in a group setting, that seeks to generate learning from human interaction during the solution of real-time (not simulated) work problems. Its original architect, Reg Revans, claimed that learning results from the independent contributions of programmed instruction (designated P) and spontaneous questioning (designated Q). P constitutes information and skill derived from material already formulated, digested, and presented – typically through coursework. Q is knowledge and skill gained by apposite questioning, investigation, and experimentation. Most action learning theorists consider Q

to be the component that produces the most behavioral change, since it results from interpretations of experience and knowledge accessible to the learner. These interpretations are bolstered by feedback from mutual learners who participate in a debriefing of the learner's workplace experiences.

In a typical action learning program, a series of presentations constituting programmed instruction might be given on a designated theory or theoretical topic. In conjunction with these presentations, participants might be asked to apply their prior and new knowledge to a real project that is sanctioned by organizational sponsors and has potential value not only to the participant but also to the organization.

Throughout the program, the participants work on their projects with feedback and assistance from other participants (who are either working on the same project as part of a team or on an individual project in their own organization) as well as from qualified facilitators. This feedback feature principally occurs in learning teams or "sets," typically composed of 5-7 participants who hold intermittent meetings over a fixed program cycle. During the learning team sessions, the participants discuss not only the practical dilemmas arising from actions in their work settings, but also the application or misapplication of concepts and theories to these actions.

Hence, actions taken are subject to inquiry about the effectiveness of these actions, including a review of how one's theories were applied in practice. Participants learn as they work, by taking time to reflect with like-minded colleagues who offer insights into their workplace problems. For instance, a unit supervisor may solicit suggestions from his team on why his participative style of management may be backfiring with a group that had formerly worked under his heavy-handed predecessor.

As can be seen, action learning uses learning teams to help participants acquire self-knowledge. In some programs, learning teams extend feedback to the conduct of the participants within the group itself, to assess their effectiveness in a group setting. Participants may also develop personal development plans

for personal and professional change and share these plans with the rest of the group. For example, a team member may list among several goals: “I wish to become more sensitive to how I come across to other people, especially my proclivity to talk over others who wish to get a word in.” Team members would then record and discuss this member’s and each other’s goals and periodically provide feedback on how they are doing in their experiments to accomplish them.

### **The Role of Facilitation**

It is considered axiomatic in nearly all group settings that facilitators not impose their will on a group; after all, the name "facilitator" suggests that the role is to help the group help itself, not to provide “right and wrong” answers. Under praxis conditions, where the goal of the experience is ultimately to learn, there are special considerations that apply to the facilitator’s role.

Andragogical skills: One way to distinguish this role is to consider that the learning is participant-directed, or what adult educator Malcolm Knowles referred to as andragogical, rather than pedagogical or teacher-directed. In andragogy, practitioners are encouraged to be more autonomous in their actions, more reliable in their assessment of their own capacities and developmental needs, and more capable of accepting greater levels of responsibility for their own and others' actions. In andragogical practice, then, facilitators need to model such behaviors in the group as tolerance of ambiguity, openness and frankness, patience and suspension of judgment, empathy and unconditional positive regard, and commitment to learning. Eventually, group members may begin to adopt some of these same behaviors, thus limiting the pro-activity of the facilitator. Some other andragogical facilitator skills discussed in the literature include:

- listening and attending
- clarifying goals, agendas, and norms
- promoting airing of problems from diverse viewpoints
- openly but sensitively confronting conflict or disagreement

- looking at the underlying assumptions operating in a situation
- revealing one's own assumptions and inferences
- being aware of inconsistencies between one's beliefs and actions
- giving feedback in a nondefensive way
- soliciting and receiving feedback from others
- reflecting on self and on the process of the group
- allowing and encouraging the airing of emotions and feelings
- encouraging group members to take ownership of their own learning
- reinforcing an open and participative environment

Learning to learn: In a learning team environment, facilitators will tend to rely on the group members to offer suggestions to one another, rather than solve their problems for them. However, facilitators do provide resource suggestions and advice on learning how to learn. Referred to as "second-order learning," this learning takes the learner out of a context or frame of reference. Instead of teaching about finance (in which the facilitator may not even have expertise), the facilitator offers ways of learning how to learn finance. Practitioners also learn how to use third-order learning – in which case they might challenge existing assumptions and beliefs in order to come up with new theories about financial systems. Facilitators also encourage participants to question their own values and assumptions. Finally, facilitators can provide alternative ways to frame the subjects of inquiry, in other words, how to look at things differently. In this way, they encourage the group to maintain a healthy appraisal of alternatives, thus avoiding the dreaded groupthink, made famous by Janis' account of the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

In practice, some facilitators find it difficult to stay clear of directing the group, though such direction or structuring can be adverse to praxis. In some action learning settings, for example, it has

been found that the more active the facilitator, the better the project outcomes on the part of the participants. Yet, there is a paradox in this view of project outcomes. Admittedly, the facilitator's advanced technical skills might lead to a better "economic" outcome, but may at the same time deprive the project team itself of some less tangible benefits or competencies, such as the use of judgment, deployment of balance and perspective, and the handling and creation of change. Task achievement may also come at the expense of personal development. Moreover, structuring by a facilitator may also deprive the project from innovative solutions generated by a more participative project team.

Facilitators can at times orchestrate actions by others rather than directly intervene in the group. Consider, for example, some methods that facilitators might use to encourage the development of member involvement and team leadership:

1. One or more members can be charged with keeping a diary of events and experiences for later examination.
2. Members can be invited to visit others in their work settings to observe them as they experiment with new behaviors and practices. Later during a team meeting, feedback can be given to those who were observed.
3. Questionnaires and other assessments can be introduced from time to time to evaluate the group's or particular individuals' styles, experiences, progress.
4. Members can be encouraged to interview each other and bring results to the entire group.
5. The facilitator can survey members of the group and develop a descriptive model of team behavior to be shared with the entire group.
6. Members with a creative flair can be asked to make drawings or other expressive works to tap both conscious and unconscious aspects of experience.

Subject matter expertise: A related issue in action learning contexts is whether the project team is better off with a facilitator who is a subject matter specialist or with one who is strategically ignorant of the project's technical environment. In the latter sense, ignorance may imply a need to ask difficult questions that participants might find useful in framing problems. In terms of acquiring team performance competencies, especially those which induce a process of inquiry within the group, the answer to this question is clear. More learning of such "meta-competencies" will likely result if the facilitator is more of an expert in group process than in the technical domains of the project. As such, the facilitator can guide such process concerns as the distribution of workload responsibilities, group member participation, the establishment of constructive group norms, the management of deviance or isolation of particular members, the expected mood swings in the group from early excitement to subsequent discouragement, and so forth. Nor should project domain ignorance cause the facilitator to refrain from sharing his or her knowledge of the organizational culture that envelops the project. Facilitators are often experienced practitioners and may know a fair amount about the norms of practice in the units affected by the project. For example, they may be able to guide participants to the best people to speak to, or they may have a good hunch of how best to obtain data in the unit, be it by survey, interview, or observation. In sum, there are different ways facilitators can share their expertise other than by providing technical direction.

Even when it comes to group process considerations, the facilitator has to tread a fine line between offering direction and exhibiting forbearance. Especially in the early phases of group development, if the facilitator comes across as too indulgent, group members may ramble from subject to subject or from content to process in a way that may overly frustrate particular members. On the other hand, if the facilitator comes across as being too directive about the process of the group, many of its members may become overly dependent on the continued direction of the facilitator. Part of the craft of

facilitation in praxis is knowing when to offer counsel to help the group overcome obstacles and when to hold back to allow group members to assume leadership roles critical to the group's internal development.

In any event, the facilitation role in praxis is not so passive as to be neutral. Yet, action learning inventor Revans was suspicious of active engagement of a facilitator in the action learning set, conceiving of the role as no more than that of a "mirror" to illustrate conditions in the set, so participants could learn by themselves and from each other. The best facilitator, according to this view, is the one who works himself or herself out of a job.

Although the gradual diminution of facilitator input is a noteworthy goal, facilitator involvement in praxis is sometimes called for, especially during some of the early moments of group formation. During this time, some participants may either knowingly or unwittingly engage in defensive communication – namely, habitual practices that prevent rather than encourage open dialogue. For example, some participants may make statements that could be considered hostile or passive-aggressive, which could result in putting others on the defensive. One or two members may dominate the conversation, allowing few others to actively participate. In addition, some members may use the group to meet unresolved personal issues, such as a drive for recognition or a need to cover up a presumed inadequacy. Although Revans thought that such issues would work themselves out, at times their resolution may come at great personal cost to some of the group's members, as well as to the group as a whole. Furthermore, the deft handling of these defensive communications by a trained facilitator can accelerate the team's development and learning.

Intervention strategies: The facilitator in praxis settings should be eclectic in the use of intervention strategies. The art of facilitation is knowing when to use which. John Heron offers six types of interventions:

Prescriptive interventions deliberately offer advice or counsel.

Informative interventions offer leads or ideas about how to proceed on a given matter, i.e., where to find an appropriate resource to contribute to a project.

Confronting interventions directly challenge members of the team on such issues as: their current process, evolving relationships within the team, restricted intellectual frameworks.

Cathartic interventions address emotional undercurrents and seek to release tension, i.e., prompting the expression of grief or anger.

Catalytic interventions provide a structure or framework to encourage the development of an idea or to remove a blockage, i.e., suggesting that a member stop, reflect, and write down her thoughts or asking someone to role-play an individual with whom a member is reporting to have difficulty.

Supportive interventions display care and attention and offer empathy.

The dexterous facilitator not only knows when to use each of these styles and activities, but when to use them in sequence or even in combination. For example, cathartic and catalytic interventions might be used concurrently, or a confronting intervention might be followed up with a number of supportive gestures. Whatever style is chosen, the underlying philosophy of most facilitation in action learning settings is to allow the participant ample room for self-discovery and personal learning.

Charles Donaghue complements Heron's list by describing four sets of interconnected activities, including interventions, which should preoccupy the facilitator. Note that his work expands the domain of facilitation to incorporate some responsibility for brokering relationships between learning teams and the organizations to which members are affiliated.

Understanding: having a good sense of the membership of the learning team, their backgrounds, their jobs, their frames of reference, and the nature of their projects.

Intervening: knowing how and when to act to influence the team given the facilitator's understanding of each member, his/her project, and the group as a whole.

Reviewing: providing feedback to the team on its original intentions, commitments, and plans as well as to individual members on their learning plans and personal development.

Integrating: establishing a link between the members and their projects within the client system or organization in order to establish sound working relationships.

### **Critical Facilitation**

As was noted at the outset, praxis has assumed a critical nature in some quarters not because it is directly associated with a change in the social order, but because its inquisitive orientation can highlight contradictions inherent in the power structure. It also often requires self-transformation at the same time that it scrutinizes the world around us. Given this expanded function of praxis, the facilitator may assume a more particularistic process role. Critical praxis requires a discourse in which members of the group are encouraged to challenge not only the statements they and others make, but also the assumptions they may be relying upon in producing the statements. Habermas referred to this kind of discourse as argumentation, an intersubjective exchange that can occur under an ideal speech situation – in which no single individual nor point of view would be privileged or free from challenge. Equal power is extended to all participants, and decisions are based upon mutual consent rather than on tradition, greed, dogma, or coercion.

Once engaged in critical discourse, even the facilitator's statements and interventions are themselves subject to validity testing. In this way, the facilitator's open inquiry can model critical praxis for the group. In addition to modeling, the facilitator can also ask the participants to debrief critical exchanges, using four tests suggested by Habermas: comprehensibility, normative acceptance, sincerity, and interpretation. These four tests have been converted by Wendy Gregory, Norma Romm, and the author into specific questions that may be asked during the debriefing, namely:

1. Do you understand what the speaker has said?

2. Do you agree with the speaker's point?
3. Do you believe the speaker is being sincere?
4. Do you agree with the speaker's interpretation of the facts and how his/her conclusions were arrived at?

By debriefing group discussions using such questions, group members can be encouraged to engage in critical praxis that allows for challenge to expressed views. It is through such validity checking discourses that groups can build a forum for open exchange and mutual learning.

Action science application: An allied approach to action learning that embraces the critical praxis orientation specified here is that of action science. Consistent with Habermas' ideal speech situation, action science calls for the deliberate questioning of existing perspectives and interpretations, referred to by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön as "double-loop" learning. What makes action science process "ideal" is how it handles mismatches between values and actions. When faced with this mismatch, most people attempt to narrow the gap by trial-and-error learning. They also prefer to maintain a sense of control over the situation, over themselves, and over others. In double-loop learning, participants are invited to subject even their governing values to critical reflection, resulting in free and informed choice, valid information, and high internal commitment to any new behavior attempted.

Action science is thus concerned with probing the deeper causal factors that lead people to interact as they do. In order to bring about fundamental and lasting improvement in the quality of discourse, it is thought that people need to reflect upon and alter the assumptions embedded in their behavior and reasoning patterns. While some of this can occur in the midst of practical conversation, action scientists believe that it more likely requires planned learning sessions.

Donald Schön preferred the term "reflection-in-action" to characterize the rethinking process of action science that attempts to discover how what one did contributed to an unexpected or expected

outcome. In order to engage in reflection-in-action, practitioners might start by offering a frame of the situation at hand. Then, if in a group situation, they might inquire as to how others see it. They would thereupon reflect upon these frames and subsequently begin to surface and test their underlying assumptions and reasoning processes. The ultimate aim is to narrow inconsistencies between one's espoused theories and theories-in-use. Espoused theories are those characterizing what we say we will do. Theories-in-use describe how we actually behave, although their revision of our espoused values is often tacit. The goal of action science is to uncover these theories-in-use, in particular, to distinguish between those which inhibit and those which promote learning.

Action science creates a real-time learning environment that permits and encourages learners to engage in emancipatory discourse, which for Habermas can become a realistic goal when practitioners engage in critical self-reflection. They learn to test their mental models, especially their inferences and assumptions about others and about their own behavior. Reflective discourse is used in this instance to determine whether the premises for our understanding or interpretations are themselves valid.

Consider the case of a project in an auditing firm. A learning team participant, a project leader, was attempting to streamline the audit process because the various parties – audit manager, audit coordinator, database developer, office manager, and other audit staff – though dependent on each other, were not communicating. As a result, the audit coordinator often was confused as to who was involved, how each party's piece was coming along, and the time each needed to accomplish the task. Focusing on this project in the learning team, a facilitator or facilitating member might ask the participant a series of double-loop questions. Those questions might include: Given how vital this project seems to be, why wasn't it done before? Why had it been allowed to persist for so long? As it turns out, the participant did make those inquiries and found that there had not been time to work on

this before, and that the audits were getting done accurately, according to management, so why tamper with success. Follow-up queries might inquire as to why novel suggestions seem to be overlooked in this firm – especially when they not only lead to inefficiencies but to the need by lower-level staff to do double-time.

Emancipatory discourse: As is apparent, the role of the facilitator in critical praxis as per action science's emancipatory approach can be quite demonstrable. Although action science facilitators would subscribe to the standard tenet that eventually the group assume the management of the experience, their interventions during the early phases of the group tend to be systematic. It is difficult to learn how to surface inconsistencies between one's governing values and action strategies. Hence, the facilitator needs to spend time actually teaching and demonstrating action science skills. In working through individual and interpersonal problems, for example, learners may at times need to reveal their defenses, placing them in a personally vulnerable position. Facilitators thus need to be not only adequately trained, but also quite active in helping the group member or members work through their feelings. Eventually, as the membership of the group gains confidence in using action science skills, participants can serve as co-facilitators and even begin to challenge the facilitator's action strategies.

It is important to emphasize that critical praxis is most consistent with what Habermas referred to as an emancipatory level of discourse, as opposed to a practical level. The practical level, most associated with action learning, solicits inquiry regarding how others see someone who has been or is currently engaged in action. By using emancipating discourse, action science takes the intervention into another, perhaps sequential, level. It becomes permissible to challenge not only the actor's theories-in-use but the questioner's perceptions and inferences, to the point of questioning the entire system's frame of reference. For many participants, and even for the system under scrutiny, action

science intervention can be threatening – as it has the potential to cause an entire reframing of the practice world. Even participants in responsible positions may not have sufficient authority or independence of action to challenge their cultures at the level of exposure sanctioned by action science.

To assist participants in undertaking systemic change, action science facilitators often create real-time experiments (perhaps using other members as role players) to help participants focus on their mental models. For example, they might elicit the attributions and evaluations the participants are making about themselves, about others, or about the system under scrutiny. Or they might have the participants slow down and reflect upon the inferential steps taken in leaping from data to conclusions.

### **Advanced Facilitator Skills in Praxis**

Facilitation has often been referred to as an art rather than a skill, because it often requires interventions that are based as much on “feel” as on pre-planned rational thought. Nevertheless, there are skills that facilitators can practice to help surface learning within praxis settings. There need be no mystery surrounding the articulation of these skills by facilitators. They can explain them to others in the learning team so that they be gradually assumed by other facilitating members of the team itself. In the model presented in Figure 1, five advanced skills are presented that my colleague, Robert Leaver, and I have found most useful in eliciting a focus on praxis. The five skills are: Being, Speaking, Disclosing, Testing, and Probing.

The skill of Being is central and pervasive, cutting across the other skills, for it represents the facilitator's presence and vulnerability in creating a reflective climate in the group. In accomplishing "being," facilitators try to experience and describe situations, even their own involvement in them, without imputing meaning to them or without evaluating them. If they are successful in modeling or helping team members learn to "be," the members can begin to explore differences and diverse

experiences together and learn from one another without initial polarization. In this way they learn to explain together.

The skill of Being can place team members in a vulnerable state to the extent they choose not to defend themselves against experience. The focus is rather on opening up to experience and to the interpersonal environment. This process produces a reflective response that can be characterized by a number of attributes of facilitation that are in direct contrast to the defensive posture; i.e.:

- Instead of maintaining unrealistic standards – one sets realistic expectations.
- Instead of expressing misgiving – one displays tolerance.
- Instead of concentrating on self-expression – one uses listening.
- Instead of being self-absorbed – one conveys humility.
- Instead of feeling out of depth – one feels open to learn.
- Instead of feeling out of context – one becomes open to experience.

Referring to the dimensions of the model, Being itself occupies the dimension called the “frame” mode. Framing refers to how we think about a situation, more specifically, how we select, name, and organize facts to make a story to ourself about what is going on and what to do in a particular situation. In the collective mode, we extend our contributions and inquiry to all the members of the group, whereas in the individual mode, we focus on own voice or address one individual at a time. The cross dimensions are 'staying with self' and 'taking action toward others.' At times, we make personal contributions to the group or focus attention on ourselves. At other times, we extend and dedicate attention to others.

Returning to the skill of Being, as a central skill it may entail staying with oneself or taking action toward others. It is most concerned with exploring differences and diverse experiences apart from members' preconceived notions. The Being skill models an inquisitive, nonjudgmental attitude

towards group phenomena. Some of its components are: inviting questions and comments, considering one's own positions as hypotheses to be tested, and acknowledging expressions of vulnerability by others. An example of Being occurred in a program management team when an account manager assembled his colleagues and asked them about a new campaign he was hoping to launch to fund a major initiative with one of his "driver accounts." Rather than merely asking them to comment on his campaign, he placed himself in a more vulnerable state by asking: "Why do I need more funding for this project?" It led to a conversation which he described as follows in his journal:

My question initiated a discussion and some very productive learning. We began to question the very presuppositions of the problem; I needed more funding to get this project started. I am generally given about three percent of my total yearly account volume to fund promotions and other business building programs at my accounts. The simple question, "Why do I need more funding?" spurred a discussion of my current situation. Maybe access to new market data will prove to be more worthwhile than the other programs I have participated in at this account for the last two years? Maybe I need to reevaluate the programs I am currently engaged in? Some ROI analysis might prove this project more worthwhile. I eventually decided to drop some of my other promotional activities at this account in order to fund this project.

The second reflective skill of Speaking is in the upper-left section of the diagram, signifying that it seeks to articulate a collective voice. In Speaking, facilitators or facilitating members attempt to characterize the state of the group or its meaning at a given time. It may entail summoning an image to articulate meaning, suggesting group norms, or bringing out uncertainties or unfounded assumptions. In Speaking, it is not necessary to prepare our words in advance. We craft our message in the moment as the meaning unfolds. One team never lost the image presented at an earlier time by their facilitator who said the team was operating like "a cargo plane having to make its destination to Istanbul, but with one engine knocked out."

In the third skill of Disclosing, one stays within oneself and, at the same time, shares doubts or voices passion. By using Disclosing, facilitators or members may unveil their feelings at a given

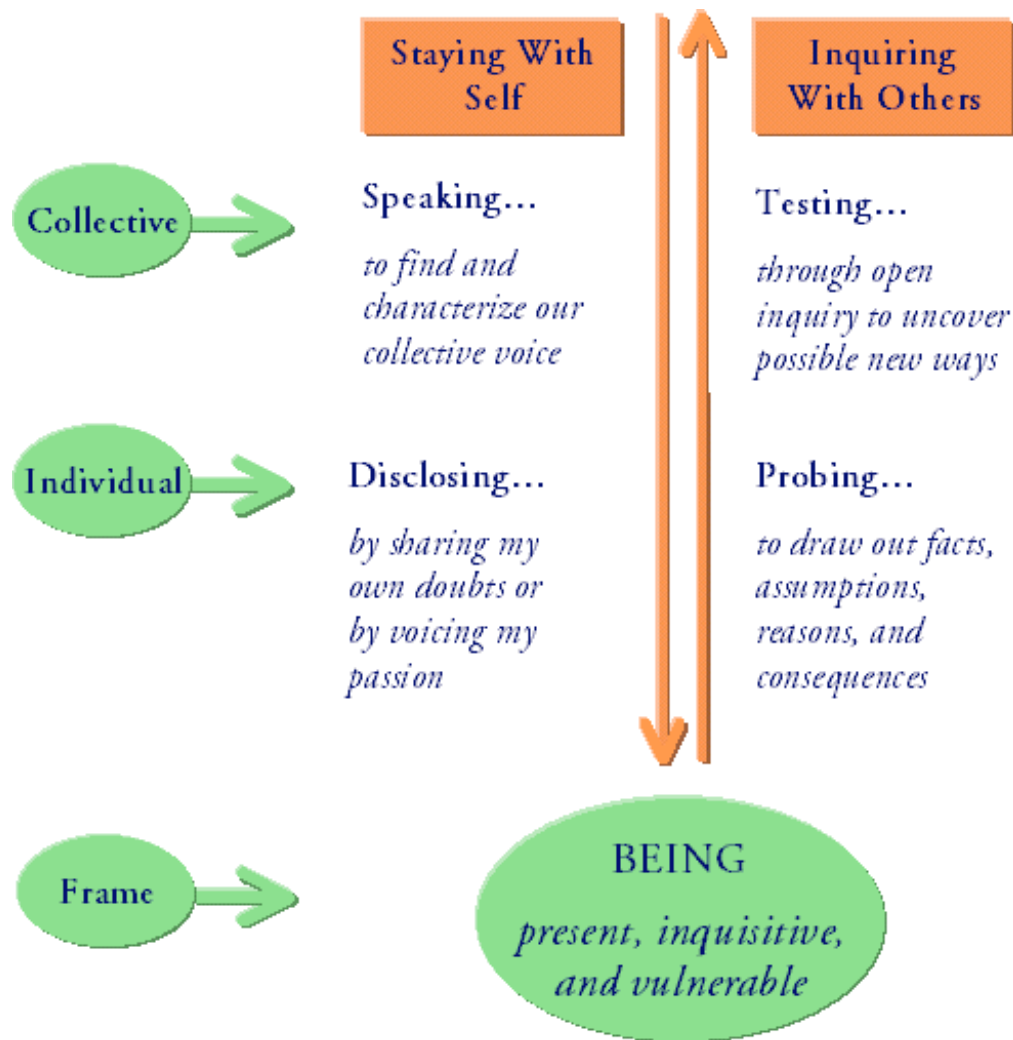
moment based on what has transpired, or they may present a story to reveal the depth of their experience. The idea is to help the group learn more about its own membership. Another cue to promote Disclosing is to ask what one might say to help the team know you better. There's a story about George Washington that reveals the power of Disclosing. Unknown to all but the most astute historians, there was a substantial movement during the waning years of the American Revolutionary War for the military to take over the civilian government and install Washington as king. At one historic point, Washington appeared before some of these military officers to condemn this affront to democracy, the cornerstone of the entire revolutionary movement. However, his speech was falling on deaf ears. Then, at one point, as he helplessly attempted to read a missive from a member of Congress, he paused to reach for a pair of glasses, something only his closest aides had known that he needed. Then he quietly confessed to his officers: "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country." The men wept. It was this statement of vulnerability alone that was thought to have nipped the movement in the bud: How could the men ignore this selfless commander who reminded them that he was one of them?

Testing is an open-ended query, directed toward the team as a whole, that attempts to uncover new ways of thinking and behaving. In using Testing, the facilitator may ask a team to consider its own process or may attempt to explore underlying assumptions previously taken for granted. In Testing, one is trying to promote a process of collective inquiry. As a Tester, a facilitator may occasionally ask for a process check or ask if someone might act out a scenario to explore an option. Perhaps readers might be familiar with the "Abilene Paradox," an interpersonal dynamic surfaced by Jerry Harvey. Harvey coined the term when pondering why he and some family members took an exhausting trip in a dust storm to Abilene, 53 miles away, when not one person in their party actually wanted to go there. Since it is an unfortunate tendency in everyday life that we often communicate the very opposite of our

wishes, based upon our assumptions of the desires of others, the Testing skill can become indispensable. We need to develop the courage to inquire about our mutual desires and actions if we are to successfully manage agreement.

Finally, in Probing, one makes a direct inquiry, typically to one member at a time, to find out the facts, reasons, assumptions, inferences, and possible consequences of a given suggestion or action. For example, probing might attempt to point out inconsistencies in members' reasoning patterns, perhaps helping them uncover the assumptions and beliefs behind particular actions. In using Probing, however, one needs to be careful not to interrogate or make any member feel defensive. On the other hand, Probing may initially have to make some members uncomfortable if they are asked to consider assumptions that had been hidden even from their own consciousness. As an example, consider a frank inquiry posed to a member named Mark: "Mark, every time that I can recall when we've thought about broaching our plans with Lisa, you chime in that she is someone that no one can work with and a person to be avoided at all costs. I wonder if you've had some experiences with her that you can share that would help us, and perhaps you too, understand what seems to be making Lisa such an obstacle. Maybe there is a way that would make it possible for perhaps one of us, including yourself, to approach her."

Figure 1: Five Facilitator Skills in Advancing Praxis



## Conclusion

Facilitation has become a popular practice not only within groups, where it got its start, but as an art and skillset that promote a focus on process in human dynamics. However, it has lost one of its initial distinctions as a service that seeks to develop both individuals and their social systems. The service orientation of facilitation becomes paramount especially when the

focus of the entity is on praxis, namely, on learning from reflection on practice. The facilitator is not just a guide to increase the efficiency of the operation or to remove the obstacles to task accomplishment. The facilitator is committed to the learning of each member within the group, as well as of the group itself, even to a degree that the membership entertains perspectives not thought of before, or questions the underlying assumptions guiding their actions. In this way, praxis facilitation can contribute to addressing one of the nagging questions that continues to confound the field of management and organizational behavior - how to engage reflection to truly bridge the gap between theory and practice.

## Selected Bibliography

There are innumerable resources in the domain of team facilitation that can be found on the Web site of the International Association of Facilitators (IAF); see, in particular, S.P. Schuman, "What to Look for in a Group Facilitator," <http://www.iafworld.org/i4a/pages/Index.cfm?pageid=3289>.

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## Biography

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