An Overview of the Dynamic Facilitation Process

**Key Underlying Assumptions:**

- Creativity is self-organizing and can’t be managed.
- Creativity is catalyzed by conflict—thus, we need to be pro-active about creating healthy conflict.
- If people remain creative, there will be breakthroughs—trust the creative process.

**How it differs from what we’re used to:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion</th>
<th>Dynamic Facilitation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Transactional&lt;br&gt;- Managed- linear-predictable- follow agenda&lt;br&gt;- Feeds logic &amp; judgment&lt;br&gt;- Emotionally detached /extrinsically driven&lt;br&gt;- Skims the surface of the issue&lt;br&gt;- The range of issues/choices is limited&lt;br&gt;- Focused on coming to a decision&lt;br&gt;- Majority rule</td>
<td>- Combines the self-organizing, heartfelt quality of dialogue with the structured, participatory quality of consensus&lt;br&gt;- Thinking naturally evolves into shared “OF COURSES” or unanimous conclusions</td>
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<td><strong>Dialogue</strong></td>
<td><strong>Followed by Consensus</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Transformational&lt;br&gt;- Self-organizing- nonlinear-unpredictable- follow energy&lt;br&gt;- Feeds creativity&lt;br&gt;- Passionate / intrinsically driven&lt;br&gt;- Explores differences &amp; underlying assumptions- the grey areas&lt;br&gt;- Suspends the need for a decision</td>
<td>- Structured&lt;br&gt;- Participatory&lt;br&gt;- Focused on arriving at a decision that everyone agrees with&lt;br&gt;- Working with objections to lead the group to smarter decisions (Superficial consensus involves negotiation &amp; compromise- leading to the lowest common denominator)</td>
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How the process typically unfolds

1. Set the chairs in a horseshoe facing four flip charts (remove tables if at all possible).

2. Introduce the topic and help people remember that they aren’t prisoners of the topic or conversation- they can change the topic as a group if it’s not the right topic (it should be one that everyone cares about) and they can leave at any time if they don’t want to be there.

3. Explain to the group that you’ll be recording all of their ideas on four flip charts, a process that ensures that every idea is valued and serves as a visual map and notes for future reference. The flip charts are titled as follows:
   - ISSUE REFRAMING- for statements or questions that indicate a shift in the group’s thinking- pointing to the need to widen, narrow, or change the focus of the inquiry.
   - SOLUTIONS
   - CONCERNS
   - INFORMATION- facts and experiences related to an issue and anything that doesn’t fit in the other categories.

   Example:
   Participant: “Right now I’m feeling really uncomfortable with this situation”
   Facilitator: “Can you say more?”
   Participant: “I’m worried that it is leaving out certain voices in the room” – CONCERN
   “I’ve noticed that the voices of dissent are often the most important to hear in terms of our ability to come to a solid decision” - INFORMATION
   “I think we should really be talking about…” - ISSUE REFRAMING
   “I think we need to…” – SOLUTION

4. Make sure you place the first two charts labeled “Issue Reframing” and “Solutions” front and central since you’ll be using them the most and that you have a lot of wall space to ensure that you can hang finished flip charts.

5. Let people know how to indicate their desire to speak. Think of ways that allow people to indicate their interest without having to keep their hand up for an extended period of time and that are considerate of those who feel uncomfortable jumping into a heated discussion.

6. Start the conversation off by asking the person with the most energy around the issue to describe it and tell why he/she cares (don’t spend time trying to define the issue first!). Put their description down as the first Issue Reframing statement (or on the solution chart if they jump to solutions). Number the statement and all subsequent statements on this chart (1, 2, 3…). Do the same for the statements/questions that you add to the other three charts (1, 2, 3…). This allows people to refer to them easily. Use bullets for sub-points.

7. Once you have recorded the person’s statement, ask him/her the question: “If you were the al-powerful Czar of the organization, what exactly would you do to address the issue?” Ask them to describe their solution in detail. Getting at the surface solutions is key at this stage of the process. Helping them “unload” their solutions/assumptions at the start of the conversation allows them to move to a new level of thinking- one that is more intelligent and collaborative. It clears space to allow for the collective intelligence of the group to emerge. It is hard for a person to listen to criticism before they’ve gotten the idea fully out of their system.

8. Once the person has communicated their point, you’ll respond by reflecting back to them what you think is the core meaning/feeling underlying their contribution (ex. “So what you
are saying/feeling is…”). This type of reflection is not about repeating exactly what the person said or putting it into your own words. You are instead acting as an intelligent lens, helping them say what they really mean, pushing them to dig deeper for their true feelings, perspectives, and attitudes. This means that you are listening to the person as fully as possible- using your own energy and creativity to wrestle with what they’re saying until you’ve grasped what you think is the essence. It is critical that you let go of your own opinions and beliefs so that you can focus on sensing where the person needs to go. Hold back urges to advise, direct, problem-solve for them, connect what they are saying to your own experience. Only say something leading if it is a fresh thought (i.e., a thought you cannot recall ever having before because it was sparked by the interaction with the person).

Two other key dynamic facilitation skills that come into play here are:

**Asking discovery questions**: A discovery question arises out of genuine curiosity. It is not part of an interrogation or motivated by any sense of what the answer ought to be. Because of the interest of the questioner, people respond generatively instead of from memory or knowledge. Your curiosity has a wisdom of its own.

**Holding the Silence**: Silence is a powerful creative force. In a normal conversation, one person says something and the facilitator is often quick to respond. This situation may not be like that since they “own” the problem and you are supporting their work. It’s more like you are helping to hold the space in which their issue may transform. In this kind of conversation the silence has an active quality.

9. Once you have come to an understanding with the person of what they want to communicate, record it on the flip chart, checking with them to make sure that it captures their thoughts.

10. Then move your attention to the next person who seems to be bursting with energy around the issue (pay attention to the quieter people who will show their energy in more subtle ways, often during periods of silence). As more people clear out their initial thoughts, they will begin to think together, building off of each other’s ideas and inquiring into perspectives that differ from their own.

11. Keep this up until it appears that the group has come to a natural decision on the issue (no more concerns or solutions are offered).

12. Leave 20 minutes at the end to wrap-up. Together with the group, take time to review the flip charts that have been generated- with a particular focus on the evolution of the Issue Reframing and Solutions charts (you could also do this mid-way through the process if you sense a lull in energy). Summarize points of convergence: decisions that naturally emerged, changes in attitude or capability, leaps or breakthroughs, jumps in trust, action items, etc.

**Things to keep in mind during the process:**

- As soon as you notice defensive cross-talk starting to happen, move into the line of fire in order to force the person to direct their concerns to you and protect the person on the receiving end from judgment (ex. “What is your concern? Let me capture it”). After they have purged their concerns ask them what they would like to see happen- turning their frustration or anger into creative thought. Then ask the person being attacked if they have anything to add. This does not mean that you should protect people from negative feelings, which are a natural part of the process. It also does not mean that you interrupt constructive interactions between participants that are clearly feeding the thinking of the entire group. Constructive cross talk and inquiry is an essential part of the process.
- Don’t be afraid to stay with each person for longer than you usually would to help them get out their ideas. We often feel the need to jump from person to person to ensure that everyone is being heard. In dynamic facilitation, it’s important to focus on each person who is talking and help them contribute in a way that is in service to the group. Helping to mine and draw out each person’s contributions.

- Reflect any patterns in the collective thinking that you observe back to the group.

- Do your best to quickly determine which of the charts the person’s contribution best fits into. Don’t worry about getting it perfect—sometimes a statement could be put on more than one chart or itself divided onto several charts (ex. the first part is a piece of information, the middle part a concern, and the last part a solution). Record in whatever way makes sense to you.

- Make sure to record people’s contributions in complete sentences— not in words or fragmented phrases.

- Shifts of focus, divergent views, strong emotions, and conflict are common and appreciated. Receive each contribution, no matter how negative or difficult, with a spirit of “yes.”

- If you hear a person state that they agree or disagree with another person, help them reframe the statement. The focus shouldn’t be on whether people agree or disagree with one another. The focus should be on thinking together—adding thoughts to the collective intelligence of the group.

- The key to dynamic facilitation is to follow the energy of the group, but don’t be afraid to slow things down.

- Throughout the conversation, try to get in the habit of probing for the solutions behind people’s comments. Behind every concern is a yearning for something different.

- Dividing the time that you have with the group into 4 separate meetings is ideal because the thinking that happens between meetings greatly contributes to the process.

- If there is someone in the group harboring a lot of apathy/sarcasm—find out what they care about. Ask them if we aren’t talking about what they feel really needs to be talked about. If this doesn’t work, ask them if they want to be there and let them know that it is completely fine if they want to leave.

- If you’re ever in the situation where you need to take your facilitator’s hat off and put the participant’s hat on, tell the group that is what you’re doing, sit down when expressing your views, and write them down on the flip chart with the other comments.

- Try to keep from asking people why they feel the way they feel or think the way they think because it reinforces a causal-linear way of thinking, which you’re trying to move them away from. Instead, simply ask them to tell you more.

(Note: The facilitator’s long-term goal is for the group to develop the skills to self-facilitate choice-creating. They are developed over time by watching the facilitator model them.)

This 4-page summary was put together by Tana Paddock (sprung.rhythm@sympatico.ca) from the notes that she took while attending a Dynamic Facilitation workshop led by Jim and Jean Rough in