

## **DEVELOPING AND LEARNING THE SKILLED FACILITATOR APPROACH**

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*The Skilled Facilitator* is a snapshot that reflects how I think groups, organizations, and communities can work more effectively. Underlying the snapshot is my journey that includes how I came to develop the approach and how I have learned and continue to learn to act congruently with it.

### **Early Interests**

As a kid, I was interested in groups and organization -- mostly because they frustrated me. As a third-grader, I couldn't understand why my humorous class contributions weren't given the same consideration as my teacher's. As a high-school student government representative, I couldn't understand why my principal wouldn't give students more involvement in the decisions that directly affected them. At a student-run crisis hotline I helped start, we made decisions by consensus and I was usually the one holdout. On the bright side, as a camp counselor, I taught a group of twelve-year-olds how to manage themselves including selecting their activities, picking teams, and setting ground rules. The next summer I became administrative camp director; I spent the summer in a drawn-out battle trying to control my direct reports who were responsible for supporting and maintaining the physical camp. My interest in organizations -- and challenging how they work -- was partly a function of the times. In the 1960s and 1970s, traditional leadership and management roles were being questioned, the field of organization development was gaining momentum, and employee participation and the quality of worklife movement were blossoming.

I majored in psychology at Tufts University and planned to be a psychiatrist, because I was interested in psychology and my parents had encouraged me to become an M.D.. I continued to be interested in groups and organizations, but from the behavioral side, not what I considered "the business side". Around my junior year, someone told me that there was a field called organizational psychology that combined psychology and organizations. That set my course.

### **Finding My Purpose**

I never took a formal class in facilitation -- it wasn't offered. As a doctoral student in organizational psychology at the University of Michigan I took classes in organization development, organization design, organizational behavior. I worked at the Survey Research Center at the Institute of Social Research and learned to develop, analyze, and implement employee feedback surveys as part of organizational change efforts. I developed my ability to think conceptually and rigorously, but something was missing. It was values. When I read Chris Argyris' book *Intervention Theory and Method* I found an approach based explicitly on a set of core values (valid information, free and informed choice, and internal commitment) that resonated with me. The core values gave me a purpose that transcended any particular group or organizational issue and infused my work with a meaning I hadn't experienced before. Argyris' focus on directly observable

behavior also energized me. I could see how the words people actually said to each other affected group and organizational outcomes, and how these outcomes were generated by the way people were thinking. I needed to learn more.

I took a leave of absence (Michigan calls it a “detached study”) from my doctoral program and went to study with Chris Argyris at Harvard University in the Graduate School of Education. I had written Chris telling him my situation and that I would be coming to Harvard mostly because I wanted to study with him. He promised to admit me to his introductory course and told me that admission to his advanced course would depend on my introductory course performance.

I took several courses from Chris, most of which were designed around the left-hand column case format. Each week the class analyzed a student’s case for three hours. I volunteered to go first. Like many of my fellow students, I was confident that I had written a case demonstrating my consulting skills. By the end of the third hour I was devastated. Chris had showed me how I had designed the conversation in a way that controlled the client, withheld relevant information, and undermined my own espoused purpose. Throughout the year I saw the same patterns in every student case. Chris helped us learn how to change those patterns by changing the very way we think.

At the end of the year I returned ambivalently to my doctoral program at Michigan. I was captivated and energized by Argyris’ approach. I was working to make it part of who I was, not just as a consultant but as a way to be in the world. I could have continued to study with Chris, but I thought of myself as an organizational psychologist and I had also been advised that finishing my doctoral degree at Michigan might make it easier to get an academic appointment.

“What’s gotten into you?” my fellow graduate students said upon my return. I was trying to practice the mutual learning approach, but was often using it *on* people instead of *with* people. I had so much passion and so little compassion – for others and for myself. I had focused on changing my behavior without changing my theory-in-use. Fortunately, I had help from my advisor Corty Cammann, who had also been a student of Argyris. With his help I continued to examine my behavior and theory-in-use.

### **Developing The Skilled Facilitator Approach**

Soon I got my first opportunity to facilitate. Corty and I had been conducting a research project at the IRS and the National Treasury Employee’s Union (NTEU is the union representing IRS employees). He was asked to facilitate a national, senior executive-level union-management committee to establish the IRS-NTEU cooperative effort incentive pay program, one of the first union-management cooperative efforts in the federal government. I was asked if I wanted to assist Corty and said yes. I had my first facilitation job.

It was energizing but nerve-wracking. I was a twenty-four year old with no previous formal experience helping facilitate a group that included the IRS deputy commissioner, the NTEU national president, and about ten other senior executives. I kept thinking, *What*

*do I have to contribute here?* But I began to make some interventions. Some worked and others didn't. Corty and I debriefed our interventions after the meetings, and I began to learn why things worked or didn't. My competence and confidence slowly increased. About a year later I taught my first workshop on facilitative skills. Corty and I designed a week-long training program to help local union-management committees at the IRS implement the program. I co-led the training with an IRS executive and an NTEU executive. I continued to facilitate and train with the IRS and NTEU for more than seven years. Over that time I was developing my own approach to facilitation.

By the time I became an assistant professor of public management and government at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, facilitative skills were the core of my work. My colleague Dick McMahon wasn't familiar with Argyris' work, but practiced an approach to facilitation and change that had similar core values. I introduced him to Argyris' work and together we continued to learn and teach others. Dick became my primary – often only – learning companion. Before I had a conversation that I thought might be difficult, I'd write a left-hand column case and Dick would help me redesign the conversation with a more mutual learning approach. We spent a lot of time role playing and giving each other feedback.

In 1990, Dick and I offered a thirteen-day intensive Group Facilitation workshop (it ran from 8:30 a.m. until 9:00 p.m. ) As we selected workshop readings, I realized that they did not fully capture my view of facilitation. The readings were mostly either theoretical or applied and I wanted readings that integrated theory in practice. The few authors who integrated theory in practice either did not focus on facilitation specifically or had different views of facilitation from mine. I wanted a values-based, systemic, internally consistent approach to facilitation that integrated theory in practice and reflected my views. During the next few years I used the core values of Argyris and Schön as the foundation to write the first edition (1994) of *The Skilled Facilitator*. Dick and I spent hundreds of hours thinking together about facilitation issues.

## **Becoming**

The book and teaching became a mirror. As I wrote about what makes a skilled facilitator, I become more aware of the gap between what I was writing and how I had been acting and thinking – as a facilitator and consultant, leader, colleague, parent, husband, and friend. At the very times I consulted to clients and taught workshops, I was privately doing what I was asking them to do – thinking about times I had used the particular ground rules or core values and times I had not. As part of my work, I taught school principals and superintendents. Here I was teaching a captive audience of the kinds of people who by frustrating me as a child had helped develop my very interest in the subject I was now teaching them! I didn't realize it at the time, but my joy came more from a vanquished-becomes-victor frame than from one of compassion. People teach what they need to learn.

As I introduced my colleagues to The Skilled Facilitator approach, they helped me see what I could not or was not willing to see for myself. When Peg Carlson and I were discussing what method we would use for a research project, she finally said, “Roger,

talking with you about this is like a war of attrition. I know we'll end up doing it your way. It's just a matter of how long I want to hang in the conversation." When Anne Davidson began working with me at Roger Schwarz & Associates, she gave me similar feedback. A pattern was emerging for me and it extended to my family as well. Even people who did not know the approach were giving me feedback - if I listened carefully. They helped me see that when I thought the stakes were high, I used the ground rules but in a unilateral controlling way. I was disappointed. I knew this happened to other people, but I thought - hoped, actually -- I had an exemption from this human condition. I forgot that often people teach what they need to learn.

As I reflected more on my thoughts and feelings, I began to see that when my compassion shrank, I became unilaterally controlling, (and vice versa). I have had help reflecting. My sister Dale Schwarz (a coach and art therapist) helped me explore my concerns in these situations and reframe my thinking enabling me to be more generous to others and myself. (In this way and many others, she has been my coach throughout my journey.) Anne continued (and still continues) to help me identify the situations in which I became unilateral, helping me explore what it was about those issues that led to my response.

I also began to notice that when my clients practiced the approach, they were often missing compassion. Of course, the approach didn't mention compassion. I tentatively added compassion as the fourth core value, concerned that my clients would see it as too touchy-feely. Dick McMahon, who is very compassionate, believed strongly that compassion was not necessary because it was embedded in the other core values. But I needed to see compassion identified as a separate core value so that I could ultimately integrate it with the others. To my surprise and relief, my clients welcomed the addition of compassion; they thought it was needed both in the model and in their organizations. Having gone public with compassion as the fourth core value I was now on record with my clients. This led me to focus more on my compassion toward others and myself in all parts of my life.

While writing the second edition of *The Skilled Facilitator*, I frequently reread the first edition. The core principles and practices were still sound. But, like a somewhat out-of-date photo of myself, I saw how I had changed. In the second edition I gave up the anonymity of third person and took accountability by writing in first person. I framed issues more in terms of dilemmas and the challenges of managing them. I revealed more of myself, including my mistakes. I was more generous to my readers. As one of my colleagues commented, the second edition was more emotionally mature.

I think of my journey as becoming the person I want to be - with myself and others. The core values are a touchstone and an ideal destination. Over the years, I continue to work - with the help of others - on the same issues that get me stuck; each time I address them I get closer to being who I want to be. Although my progress isn't linear, over time I have increased the length of time I can stay in the mutual learning mode in more difficult situations before I revert to unilateral control. I've come to see this as natural process of

fundamental change. For my own compassion, I've begun acknowledging – even quietly celebrating - my growth along the journey.