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1

THE NOVICE TO EXPERT JOURNEY

In this chapter, we describe how facilitators can move from novice to expert levels in their ability to intervene when disruptive events occur. Readers will be able to place themselves along a continuum of novice to expert and learn about appropriate next steps at their stage of the journey. We begin with an example that demonstrates the work of an expert facilitator – knowing just how and when to intervene to keep both individuals and group members working toward productive ends.

The group is challenging. Participants' resistance is growing, and suddenly, a strident voice bursts out, "This is a waste of time!" Group members hold their breath and wait for the facilitator's next move. The facilitator's response to this kind of challenge separates the novice from the expert. A novice may try to justify and run the risk of getting into an argument. The expert knows how to listen and move toward a resolution.

Consider this expert series of moves demonstrated by a colleague. As he tells it, 90 minutes into a work session, a teacher angrily shouted out, "What does this have to do with algebra?" Even an experienced facilitator will be taken aback by unexpected outbursts and has to calm himself before dealing with the situation. This is the intervention pattern our colleague used.

Step 1: Paused, breathed, and moved toward the speaker. This is an important step because it helps the facilitator monitor and adjust his internal state.

Step 2: Asked for the speaker's name. From this point on, the conversation is no longer anonymous.

Step 3: Used the speaker's tone to paraphrase so that the speaker knew that his emotion was understood. In a firm, but slightly angry tone, the facilitator said something like, "You're upset

because what we are doing seems like a waste of time to you.” Getting agreement about the speaker’s emotional state is a critical move. The speaker responds with an affirmation or a clarification.

Step 4: The facilitator made a polite inquiry as to the difficulty the speaker was having and began to move the conversation toward productive resolution. Now in a normal tone of voice he said, “Help me understand the problem you are having.” He attempted to talk through the difficulty. This step does not take more than a minute of group time. If a resolution will take longer, the facilitator moves to the next step.

Step 5: The facilitator in this case said something like, “I now recognise that this challenge deserves more time than we have right now. Can you hang out until the break when we can work to resolve the issue?”

Step 6: At break time, the facilitator had a private conversation in an attempt to resolve the issue. Most people will agree to meet at the break, and 99% of the time, they will show up ready to solve the problem. They often just want to be listened to, and once they are, their resistance evaporates. For those not willing to meet at the break, the expert facilitator moves to Step 7.

Step 7: The facilitator would say, “You seem to be between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, you feel mandated to be here; on the other hand, you are not producing value for yourself and your students. You have a difficult choice. Stay here and I will do what I can to help you make connections to your students, or leave the room and do something else that will benefit your algebra students more than being here. Know that I will support you 100% whichever decision you make.” With that, the facilitator would turn and walk away from the participant, enforcing the principle of never taking choice away in difficult confrontations.

This example demonstrates the work of an expert facilitator – knowing just how and when to intervene to keep both individuals and group members working toward productive ends. The point is the facilitator was able to recognise this outburst as threatening to the group, was able to ground himself, and worked directly with the situation. With his actions, he communicated in a way that the group learned that such outbursts would be handled safely and respectfully. He demonstrated his clear intention to protect the group and his commitment to a larger theme – that the time spent together should be useful. He communicated a deep respect for group members’ right to dissent while also requiring the dissenter to become part of the solution.

A facilitator without much experience will have a much more difficult time when faced with threatening challenges. Beginners faced with such animosity often crumble as their brain, specifically the amygdala, goes into overdrive and urges the body toward automatic responses appropriate to physical danger, wiping from their motor memory the rules they might have learned for dealing with disruptions. Novice facilitators necessarily relegate the majority of their attention trying to practise rudimentary facilitation techniques, or they become distracted or flustered when things do not go according to plan. Much of the time, the novice responds with a defensive posture or judgementally.

Accomplished facilitators respond elegantly to the unexpected because they've learned how to effectively anticipate, predict and modify their approaches to problems in the moment as necessary. Expert facilitators' learning arc is enhanced because they are self-directed learners – self-monitoring, self-reflective and self-modifying. Over time, they have rehearsed and practised sequences of moves, and they are able to link complex moves together into coherent and successful interventions.

To intervene means to take action to change what is happening or might happen to prevent counterproductive behaviours. The goals for intervening always are to improve group performance or to develop the group's capacity for effective and efficient work. We believe that effective intervention is a moral imperative; time is a valuable asset that ought not to be wasted, and when all voices contribute, the sum is greater than the parts.

WE ALL BEGIN AS NOVICES

A novice is someone who has not yet acquired the skills and experience needed to perform a trade, a career or a profession – in this case, the skills of intervention. To a novice, the expert's skills may seem invisible or even magical. They are unaware of the expert's subtle abilities to recognise patterns and possibilities. Based on these, the expert is also clear about intentions and follows through on these intentions in congruent ways.

In medicine, doctors serve internships. In business, beginning executives often are mentored. As they are mentored, beginners are expected to hone their metacognitive skills, along with increasing their knowledge and performance-related skills, to speed the journey to becoming an accomplished professional. In the teaching profession, novices are called “beginning teachers” and provided special support during their novice years. Beginning facilitators seldom have such deliberate support. Often, novice facilitators have limited practice time. The infor-

mation in this book gives leaders a head start with skills we have honed over the course of two careers. We offer you an opportunity to envision success by learning from our experiences as experts in the field. The journey to competence takes time, commitment and patience.

Everyone starts as a novice and, over time, in the right settings with much practice, can become accomplished in successfully intervening with groups. Working toward a status of expert or accomplished facilitator must be a conscious decision. Remembering our years as novices, we recognise that becoming an expert facilitator is a journey that never ends. Just when we think we have mastered the art, a group challenges us in ways that require new expertise, and we are once again improvising new solutions.

Authors Malcolm Gladwell (2008) and Matthew Syed (2010) point out that in any field, expertise is less a matter of talent than of practice. The term *expert* has come to mean a person with an unassailable grasp of the field, one who operates at not merely a good level, but at a level nearer to perfect. Several studies have shown that people enter this rarified state after many hours of engagement and practice – 10 000 hours is the figure most commonly used.

Because investing thousands of hours in refining facilitation skills is not feasible for most, we use the term *accomplished* to represent the end of the continuum toward which we strive. Gladwell (2008) and Syed (2010) emphasise that novices need to work through trial and error and to become responsible for figuring out solutions. A coach or mentor may help along the way, but in the end, the learner is in control of the skills that are practised and that become part of an ever-increasing repertoire.

ACCOMPLISHED MEANS COMPETENT

The path to mastery requires that learners move through five phases – from being unaware or uninformed to becoming highly accomplished and able to use skills both consciously and unconsciously. The keys to mastery are time and persistence. Figure 1.1 shows the path from being uninformed to accomplished facilitation.

Uninformed

At this stage, the facilitator is simply unaware of responsibilities and strategies associated with intervening. Facilitators view meetings as necessary and outside of their overt control.