ConvergentFacilitation™

Efficient, Collaborative Group Decisions

Convergent**Facilitation**™

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Introduction: Why ConvergentFacilitation

We live in extreme times. With every passing year, the pressing issues of environmental degradation and resource depletion; war and violence; poverty and social inequality; and individual malaise, loom larger and become more urgent. No one alone would be able to solve any of these issues, because even the most powerful people on the planet do not, individually, possess enough wisdom and knowledge to identify solutions without massive input from others, nor is there anyone who has sufficient power to enact solutions unilaterally – our systems are just too intricately interwoven. We need to come together.

At the same time, for the last several thousand years most people have lived in societies and institutions organized first around outright coercion and then around the subtle coercion of competition and incentives. Our collaboration muscles have all but atrophied. Not equally or across the board: there are definitely pockets of individuals, groups, communities, and even regions in the world where collaboration is still known and practiced. There is also a growing commitment to collaboration, and an increasing number of small and large scale experiments, perhaps the largest of which is Wikipedia. Nonetheless, I have noticed a pervasive inability to collaborate effectively in every country I've taught at (and the list is large), and in every organization I have worked with.

1. A Different Path

Convergent Facilitation is part of my response to this state of affairs. Over the years, my experience has been unequivocal that Convergent Facilitation brings about dramatic and breakthrough results in groups, even groups that have been stuck for a long time. The most dramatic example of such a breakthrough that I have facilitated, which I did in person and on the phone for

> "I don't want to be identified with a side. We are no longer doing that. We are a group of people working together to solve problems." —Minnesota legislator

over two years was a group comprised of Minnesota legislators, lobbyists, lawyers, advocacy groups, judges, and child development experts. The issue they were facing was child custody legislation. They were about as divided on the issue as any group could be. So much so, that it took a major effort to get them all to agree to be in the same room together. Two years later, the group approved, unanimously, sixteen different changes to their state's legal system that they all thought were an improvement on what previously existed. Along the way, one legislator said: "I don't want to be identified with a side. We are no longer doing that. We are a group of people working together to solve problems."

If this sounds like incredible magic, extraordinary luck, or exceptional talent, I see it differently. I have trained many people in this methodology, including people who didn't necessarily imagine they could achieve spectacular results, who then went on to have their own amazing successes.

Overview: What is ConvergentFacilitation?

Convergent Facilitation is a 3-phase process that makes it possible for groups to make decisions about matters of significance to the group. Its aim is a decision that everyone can wholeheartedly embrace even if it's not their preference. What does it look like in practice?

Example – Deciding on a seating arrangement:

Lori Draper, the Vice President at a bank, attended an early version of a Convergent Facilitation workshop and put what she learned into practice immediately when her boss assigned her the project of reorganizing the layout at one of the bank's branches.

On her first visit to the branch, she could see that the configuration of the desks, cubicles, and private offices wasn't working for the customers and most of the personnel. Business bankers and the staff who assisted them had large cubicles in the front of the branch. A new customer who wanted to open a personal checking account would wait in the line for the tellers only to be redirected to the back where the personnel who took care of this responsibility were crammed in small cubicles.

Lori made an initial plan for moving everybody around but realized that the people who had in some cases worked there for 20 years would probably have ideas that would be far more informed than hers. She was also energized by the prospect of having a change that would be met with resistance.

She told her boss that she wanted to solicit their input. He said, "What a mess that meeting will be! Everyone will be complaining and talking over each other. They'll only come up with reasons why this move is a bad idea, not solutions for the task at hand. Just tell them how you want it done and have them live with it." Despite his strong doubts, he agreed to let her try the process she wanted.

Criteria Gathering ➡ She convened an initial meeting in which she told everybody at the branch that the floor plan would be changing and she wanted their participation in a meeting the following week to create a proposal. She presented to them the criteria they might want to consider in creating proposals: more customer convenience, smoother traffic flow, and privacy for confidential conversation.

Proposal Creation ➡ Of the 17 people who worked at the branch, 13 attended the second meeting and eight people brought in detailed proposals that included measurements and plans for handicap accessibility.
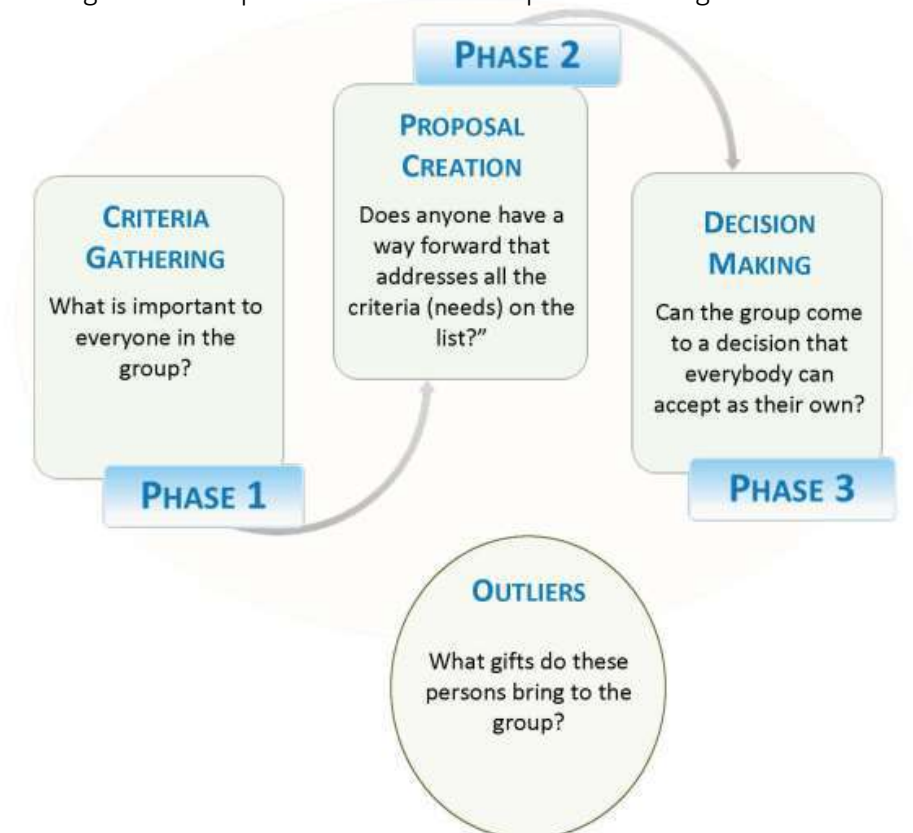
> Everybody enjoyed the pizza Lori brought and then they went to work. First they reviewed Lori's initial list of the needs that the final plan would need to meet to yield the best results for everyone, and added cost containment to it.

Decision Making ➡ They then made a grid and evaluated each proposal by checking off the boxes for the needs each fulfilled. It became clear to everyone that one plan met the most needs. The winning plan was actually created by a business banker who moved HIMSELF to a smaller cubicle in the back of the branch. Even the people who weren't happy to move their offices weren't angry because they could see how their own inconvenience served the collective purpose.

If you are amazed by the generosity of that banker, I no longer am. I have seen such gestures regularly, because the process supports it. When people know that their needs matter, when they take in other people's needs, and when they are invited to care for the whole, the creativity and generosity that ensue are often deeply moving. This is the core insight that is at the heart of Convergent Facilitation.

From this example you can see that Convergent Facilitation breaks down into a process with three phases that, together, maximize willingness to stretch towards the shared purpose, generosity, and efficiency.

Here's a diagram of the process and the core question that guides each element.

PHASE 2

PROPOSAL CREATION

Does anyone have a way forward that addresses all the criteria (needs) on the list?"

CRITERIA GATHERING

What is important to everyone in the group?

PHASE 1

DECISION MAKING

Can the group come to a decision that everybody can accept as their own?

PHASE 3

OUTLIERS

What gifts do these persons bring to the group?

Facilitation Principles for Efficient Collaboration

Including people in decision-making is often a challenge because most people don't have successful experiences combining collaboration with efficiency. Convergent Facilitation was born from the conviction that fully collaborative decisions are entirely possible. Moreover, my experience tells me that, with skillful facilitation, collaboration often yields better decisions without compromising efficiency.

1. Core Principles

Facilitating a collaborative decision-making process takes a shift in our attitude towards this elusive thing we call time: instead of saving time up front and losing it later, the choice is to invest time up front and harvest the results later.

The usual outcome of this process is a decision everyone can accept as their own. Another possible outcome is a shared recognition that a collaborative decision cannot be made within available resources. The group can then choose to change the time constraints, willingly accept a noncollaborative decision-making process, or let go of making a decision.

How is all this possible? Simply put, it's because people tap into their deepest creativity and find true willingness once everyone trusts that their own needs and perspective matter. These remarkable results emerge from a strong commitment on your part to two basic principles, not just to following steps; because these principles are different from the ones we've been using for hundreds of years. The differences are deep enough, that bridging the gap often requires a kind of faith about who we are as human beings.

We all want the same things. One part of this faith involves trusting that all of us want the same things, even though superficially we can be at war.

Human beings can shift. The second part is to remember and believe that when we humans are really heard, shifts happen.

Here are the principles which provide the core framework for this process to unfold:
- Everyone matters.
- Distinguish between the "what" and the "why". In my experience, most people, most of the time, are not invested in their preferred outcome (the"what") provided they are heard fully for what's behind their preferred outcome or objection (the"why").
- Hold the process tightly, and the outcome lightly.

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2. Breakthrough Insight: Cultivating willingness

Willingness is the core ingredient that makes Convergent Facilitation work. It guides the entire process: preferences rarely line up and yet people are very often willing to let go of their preference and adopt a different decision if certain conditions are met. Mostly, it's when they know they matter and their needs are included, and when they have successfully been invited to steward the whole, as discussed below. This understanding is one of the keys to the possibility of convergence. Here's why.

When a conversation is focused on finding something that everyone *is happy* with instead of what everyone is *truly willing to live* with, discussions often bog down as we try this or that strategy hoping that it will align with everybody's preferences. If, instead, the focus is on willingness, people can be invited to stretch towards each other to find something they can all willingly accept.

3. Working towards Efficient Collaboration

Here I provide a few more guidelines to consider and use in any of the phases.

Where's the opening? Where's the obstacle?

Overall, when using Convergent Facilitation, I continually hold my sight on the ultimate goal: reaching a decision that works well enough for everyone. With that in the forefront of my mind, I rarely move in a straight, logical, linear manner. Instead, I dance with what's happening in each moment to see where to go next.

Make strategic use of every word

The core principle here is one of no waste. For example:

- Say everything only once unless you learn that something you said was not clear.
- Consider how what you're about to say or ask can truly move the group forwards to get to a decision or to have clarity that the group can't make a decision at this time.
- Make sure that everything you say ends with a clear request to the group.
- Focus on hearing every *need* in the room, not necessarily hearing every person.
- Make requests that people can respond to without speaking. Any kind of yes/no question reduces the possibility of a discussion that gets out of hand.
- Ask for information only when you need it in order to move forward. For example, there's no reason to hear about why people like a proposed agreement, only what's in the way of reaching the goal.
- Invite brevity from the group by specifying the length of time you want people to speak, knowing that whatever you ask for, people are likely to talk longer, because most people want to be heard.
- Minimize the chances of hearing information twice from people by asking people to only speak if they have something to say that hasn't yet been said.

Working towards Efficient Collaboration (continued)

Follow a trajectory of meaning

Many groups tend to follow a rule that people speak in the order in which they raise their hand. What I propose to groups, instead, is to follow a trajectory of meaning. As each person speaks, I tend to reflect and capture what they said to their satisfaction. Then I focus on those people who have something to say that is related, until that particular thread is complete, and therefore digested by the group. Only then do I ask for other threads to be started.

Make convergence visible

Since the goal of this process is to create convergence, any time you sense that some people may have shifted in their openness or willingness, or in their attachment to their own preferred outcome as needs are expressed, check this out explicitly. This is powerful feedback both for you and for the group, since convergence might come from unexpected corners.

Take full responsibility for the process

The ultimate responsibility for the process resides with you; you are the one who is explicitly there to look after the group as a whole. Others may join this leadership framework, and they go in and out of it while your role means you occupy this position explicitly for the duration of the process. This is precisely why facilitating is so demanding.

Tend to the energy in the group

One of the most important things you can do as a facilitator is to support the group in maintaining its energy and focus. Here are a few ways you can attend to this that are specifically about being in a decision-making process such as Convergent Facilitation:

- Reminding the group of where they are in the process, what's coming, and/or what the purpose is.

- Appreciating people, either individuals or the group as a whole. For most people, aiming for a collaborative decision is hard work. They are asked to stretch, to articulate their needs more fully, to hear other people's needs, to set aside their favorite scenario, to believe people they previously mistrusted, and more. Any time you notice anyone, or the group as a whole, doing any of those things, you can simply name it and continue. Each time you do it, the level of energy and willingness tends to increase.

- Naming explicitly the goal of a decision that everyone can accept as their own rather than majority vote, decision by leaders, or unfocused discussion. Within this context, you can also remind people of their role as stewards of the whole instead of advocating for their own positions.

Phase 1: Criteria Gathering

1. Core Question

What is important to everyone in the group?

2. Purpose

The purpose of this phase is to come up with the list of criteria that will guide the rest of the process by listening carefully to what matters to different individuals in the group. This phase is key to creating both goodwill in the group and sufficient healthy, creative constraints to enable a solution to emerge and be decided on later. It's when people are heard, when needs – the "why" underneath people's opinions and suggestions – are taken into consideration, and when shared ownership of all the needs is established.

In my experience, most people, most of the time, are not invested in their preferred outcome (the "what") provided they are heard fully for what's behind their preferred outcome or objection (the "why"). This distinction is vitally important all through this process. A key art of the role of facilitator is to continually translate and capture the many "whys" that are present in such a way that they can be owned by everyone.

3. Breakthrough Insight: Finding the noncontroversial essence

The key element in this phase is that whatever anyone says is converted by the facilitator (sometimes with the help of participants) into what I call the noncontroversial essence: the "why" that can be owned by everyone. It's something the speaker recognizes as capturing the essence of what's important to them that is at the same time noncontroversial for others in the group.
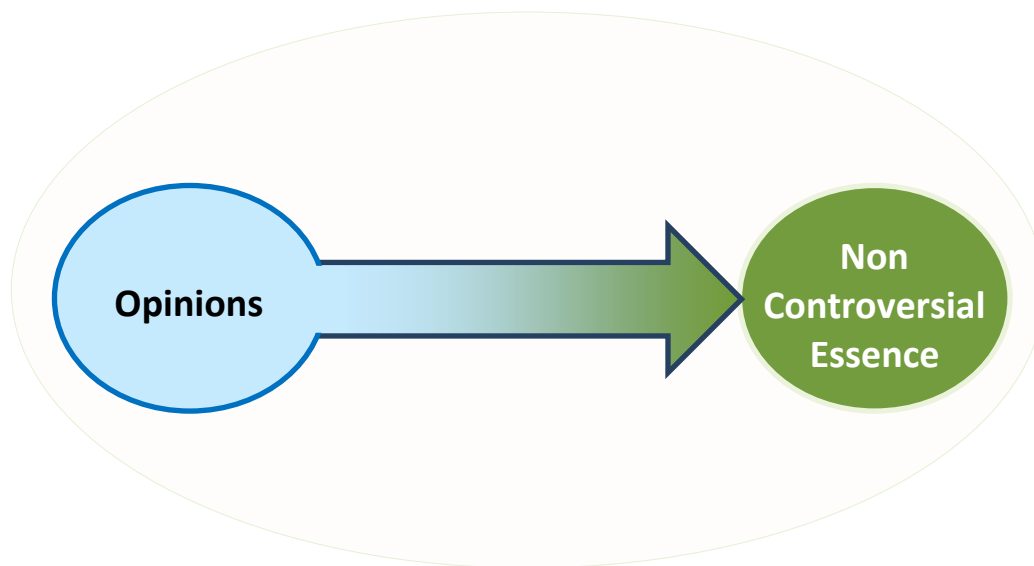
4. How to listen to participants in a group

Getting to the essence of what somebody is saying starts by listening effectively. This is a basic facilitation skill which you can use every time you facilitate a meeting, whether the group is trying to reach a decision or not. Here are some tips about listening:

Show don't tell. Instead of saying "I understand" or "I hear you," you can show your understanding by identifying what's really important to them, expressing it in noncontroversial language, and checking with them to see if your expression matches what they wanted to be heard about.

Listen without responding. Stay with the person speaking until they are fully heard. Any time you shift focus and respond in any way, such as arguing, reassuring, presenting more data, or sharing your own opinion, it shifts the energy from the other person to you. Stick with them. In particular, resist the temptation to try to convince them of anything. In short, it never works. Listen first, and only speak when you truly have the other's attention, which rarely happens without being heard first.

No buts or ands. If you want to respond to what the person is saying rather than simply hearing them, which is rarely helpful to someone who wants to be heard, separate your response and wait till later. Most especially, avoid sentences such as "I hear that you want … but (or and) we still need to …" Instead, confirm with the person that you hear them accurately, and only then offer what you want them to hear.

Take people at face value. If you can cultivate, on purpose and on principle, a practice of hearing people at face value, you will soon discover that people trust you and lower their protection around you, because it's so powerful for any of us to be heard in that way. If you're thinking about their agenda, you're losing the ability to just be with a person and see what happens next.

5. Finding the noncontroversial essence

Your main task is to hear the underlying noncontroversial essence behind what people say and reflect it back to them in a way that captures for them what they intended to be heard about while at the same time framing it in such a way that everyone else can take ownership of it.

Because none of us are habituated to speaking at this level spontaneously, this requires you to train your ears to listen for the essence. You can help yourself a tiny bit by being precise in what you ask people to speak about. Instead of asking them for their positions, opinions, what they believe is the way to go, or anything else that points them to the "what," your goal is to help everyone get to the "why" or, at least, to the most essential level of the "what."

6. How to Get to the Essence

As facilitator, ask yourself these questions:
- "What's really important to this person?"
- "What does this person need?"
- "Why does this matter to this person?"
- "… and if this person had this, what would it give them?"

Does the answer you've come up with have these characteristics?
- … is noncontroversial
- … can be evaluated (subjectively)
- … uses positive language – what is wanted rather than what is not wanted
- … is relevant to the context
- … is operational – can in principle be made to happen
- … applies to everyone – this is a need that everyone can recognize, not just one person's need
- … doesn't have a specific outcome (as long as it's noncontroversial, this is the least important criterion)

If it does have these characteristics, check in with the person by saying, "So what you want is…" or "Is it that you want …"

If it doesn't have these characteristics, keep engaging with the person until you have found the words that match their intent and are noncontroversial needs at the same time.

One way that you can begin to train yourself to find the essence is to listen to several things at once. One is that you listen to every word as a clue though, in the end, most of the words will be discarded when you formulate the noncontroversial essence. The other is to listen, first and most strongly, for where the highest emotional charge is in the message or in yourself.

Another part of how I work it out is to check, internally with an imagined "other side" within me to see if what I am about to say as a reflection would be noncontroversial for them. If I feel inside that my internal imagined representation of someone else in the group is unhappy with the wording, it's a good chance the real someone in the group will also be unhappy, and it's worth continuing to explore to find something less controversial.

7. Examples: Noncontroversial Essence

Here are some examples of things people might say, and a possible reflection that aims to be positive, more universal, and noncontroversial.

Situation: Facilitating a process of reshuffling people's seating arrangements in an office.

Opinion:	Noncontroversial Essence:	Comment:
My desk is too small.	I imagine what's important to you is that everyone have the physical conditions to do their job well. Is this why you want a bigger desk?	Extrapolating from the specific category of desk to the larger category of physical conditions – as close as possible without focusing on the speaker's individual issue.

Situation: A team-building retreat, where people speak about their concerns with their team leader.

Opinion:	Noncontroversial essence:	Comment:
I want John to stop being abusive.	Are you saying this because you want a sense of safety at work, a respectful environment that fosters trust?	Others can recognize themselves in what's wanted whether or not they agree that John is abusive.

Situation: Staff meeting

Opinion:	Noncontroversial essence:	Comment:
We can't offer comp time anymore. Everyone has to work a 40-hour week. And no overtime, either. So just get used to it.	I get a visceral sense of how important this is to you. Is the issue that you want human resources to be utilized in an effective and fair manner?	The broadening allows more people to join in and diffuses the tone of accusation that could easily polarize a group.

Situation: Financial statements

Opinion:	Noncontroversial essence:	Comment:
I don't understand how for 9 months we have no financial statements. I can't execute	You want the information and tools necessary to assess the financial integrity of the agency?	This reframe removes the blame and invites people to notice that they would want the same thing, too. This

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fiduciary responsibility without financial statements.		reframe broadens what's said.

Phase 2: Proposal Creation

1. Core Question

Does anyone have a way forward that addresses all the criteria (needs) on the list?

2. Purpose

The purpose of this phase is to come up with one or more proposals that attend to the list of noncontroversial criteria from phase one. This is the most undirected, emergent, and creative part of the Convergent Facilitation process. So long as people trust their concerns matter and have emerged from the first phase with goodwill and a commitment to solutions that attend to the entire list of criteria, at least as much of it as possible, they will find potential paths forward that very often are totally out of the box, new, daring, and clearly beyond either/or frames.

Although this may seem fantastical given that so many groups do not operate on this plane and, instead, are rife with mistrust, divergent agendas and expectations, and damaging history, my experience is unequivocal: when you bring faith as a facilitator, and invest sufficient attention early on in the process on truly surfacing all that is important, not just what's "allowed" to be said, the level of commitment is likely to surprise you.

3. Breakthrough Insight: Reaching a shared commitment to the whole

Participants are now shifting their intention to serving the common good rather than advocating for their own position or expressing their own needs. They are now stewards of the whole, not advocates for their position. What they are stewarding is both the concrete list of the needs that they all participated in generating earlier and the felt sense of the totality of the group, its dreams, its trust, however tentative it might be. It's from within this orientation that they develop proposals.

This shift, from advocating for their own position to serving the common good, is pivotal to the success of the process, and the process doesn't move forward until the shift is truly wholehearted.

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4. Example 1: Reaching a Shared Commitment to the Whole

Suppose you're trying to decide, with a group, whether to wait for latecomers or start at the agreed upon time, and you're hearing opposing opinions. If Martha expresses her concern about waiting, from which you gleaned that she wants to maximize learning time, you could turn to the group and say: "Hearing that this is Martha's concern about maximizing our learning and movement, is that enough for you to shift? Are you willing to go ahead and start? Or is there something important about waiting that you'd like to express?"

Let's say that Jamal then expresses his concern about people coming in and not being able to participate. Here's what you might say then: "So you want to wait so the people who are not here have the chance to participate with us from the start.

Does anyone have a suggestion that would address both concerns?"

If you experiment in this way, you will gradually discover that groups can be amazingly creative if invited to do so. One group, in this exact scenario, created an elaborate system of buddies for the latecomers, and then got to work with everyone on board.

Example 2

Often each person believes that the particular proposal they are enthusiastic about is the perfect one, and all that's needed is to convince everyone else that it's so. Once people shift – with your support – from perfect preference to willingness, and shift their intention to serving the common good rather than advocating for their own position, the outcome can then work, sometimes indefinitely, without anyone questioning it again.

One small and essential example of a very workable imperfect solution is the perennial question of temperature in a room full of people. Do we open the windows or keep them closed? Turn the A/C up or down? There *really* is absolutely no way to find something that works for everyone all the time.

Nonetheless, so far I haven't found anyone who cannot embrace this simple strategy in a group. Whatever the setting is – open windows, closed windows, this or that temperature of the A/C – I ask everyone to agree to keep it without any change for 10 minutes. Then, after at least 10 minutes, if anyone feels uncomfortable and wants to change it, they simply go ahead and do it and then let the group know they changed it. At that time, the new setting remains for at least 10 minutes, until someone wants to change it again. Although people may not *like* being slightly warmer or colder than is perfect for them, everyone can easily stretch for 10 minutes before changing, especially when they are spared all the annoying interminable discussion about it.

5. Who will work on a proposal?

If the group is small enough, tremendous gains can be made by having them all participate. Most groups become unwieldy if there are between eight and 10 people in them, and you will very likely want to form one or more committees.

The committee or committees are entrusted to come up with proposals that address the most criteria and meet the most needs. The proposals are then brought back to the larger group for further discussion and a final decision.

If the group is large enough and/or if there is enough tension and mistrust, multiple committees/small groups to work on proposals can give more people a sense of involvement as well as more chance overall for creative solutions to emerge.

Multiple committees are useful, in particular, when the task at hand is substantial and can be divided, and/or if there are multiple stakeholders that want to be involved in all phases or if the final decision would benefit if everyone is involved with proposal creation. In that case, make sure that each committee is comprised of people who have different perspectives and expertise.

There is no "science" to the decision about whether to have multiple committees working on the same problem, resulting in more than one proposal at the end, or have each committee work on a different part of the problem such that the resulting proposals add to each other rather than run in parallel. Dividing the problem requires, in general, more trust, and more considerations of matching skills to tasks. On the other hand, it leaves each committee with less work. Another consideration is that multiple parallel committees do allow more voices to be involved in holding all the needs, which is why it may work better when there isn't enough trust.

The temptation is often to pick the people who are most agreeable and moderate, and that can lead to complete disintegration when a proposal is presented to the larger group. Instead, aim to pick the people who are least likely to accept the proposal at the end. You want to have the diversity of needs and the most intense attachments to outcome in the committee that's doing the work. Others will then more likely follow. In other words, consider selecting the people with the strongest opinions and greatest potential to block the process, so that you can have the most potential for controversy in the committee.

6. Tracking

During the proposal phase, when much of the work is being done by the group, you will likely be using many of your overall facilitation skills to support them in focusing on their task. In part, this is because on their own they are more likely to get bogged down in discussions that don't converge. Your main task, then, is to keep them on track with an ongoing invitation to come up with a proposal that attends to as many needs as possible.

At all times, in any phase of this process, it's part of your role as the facilitator to assess what is happening in the group and respond to it. This capacity to track what is happening is the most significant facilitation skill for this phase, which is why I am presenting it here even though this is a skill that you will likely use in any form of facilitation and any part of the process. This skill is crucial in this phase in particular so you can keep the process going and focused, and to support people's confidence and trust in the effectiveness of the facilitation.

I focus on tracking six elements: purpose, time, people, power differences, criteria/needs, and open loops. If you have a concern about any of these elements, you could propose a way for the group to refocus, or you could bring the issue to the attention of the group to support their decision about what they want to do. The choice about which way to go depends on how the process was set up and how much active facilitation you gravitate towards.

- **Tracking Purpose:** Is what's happening related to the group's purpose?
- **Tracking Time:** How much time is left in the meeting? How much time did the group agree to discuss this topic? What do you want to focus on given the amount of time left?
- **Tracking People:** Who is waiting to speak? Who hasn't spoken at all? Is the person complete with a topic – both the content and emotion underneath it?
- **Tracking Power:** What are the power relations in the room and how do they affect the process? Power differences affect the process of decision-making at all the phases, depriving the group of useful dissent, of essential criteria, and of creative ideas.
- **Tracking Criteria/Needs:** Is the discussion focused on the criteria/needs that have been identified? Are there needs left unattended as a group is forming proposals? Does a change in a proposal meet more or fewer criteria/needs?
- **Tracking Open loops:** Are there requests or topics on the table that haven't been closed yet because you attended to something else first?

7. Example: Proposal Creation

The flow in this phase is the most organic and open-ended, and the most difficult to orchestrate in any structured way, because the main asset here is the creativity present in the room.

Here's an example of how this may unfold. Imagine a team that got together for figuring out how to engage with a new production procedure. Rather than going through a separate criteria gathering phase, the group may even start the process directly with proposal creation, choosing to identify the needs through exploring a variety of options and the objections that come up.

Here are some of the needs they may discover:

a. order and coherence in the production sequence
b. staying on the cutting edge of the industry
c. respect for employees' experience
d. ease of implementation
e. sustainability for the company

Initially, there may be a tug between two strategies on the table. One strategy may be to invite a newly hired production manager, with an advanced degree in engineering, to design the full implementation. This strategy is likely to address a, b, and d above, but not c, and e (this person may be familiar with state of the art processes, but not as fluent with the internal systems within the company in order to know who to involve in the planning and what the ramifications are for the sustainability of the company).

The other strategy being considered may be to adopt right away some of the steps of the proposed procedure, assess their effect, and then decide again about other steps. This strategy is likely to address a, c, and e, but not necessarily b and d.

As the team reviews and assesses the proposals, it can easily happen that someone will suddenly pop up with a new proposal that attends to all the needs. This might be to ask the new production manager to partner with a senior floor worker and with a representative from finance and form an implementation committee with them. With the two additional members, the implementation committee can now ensure that the needs for respect and sustainability are addressed alongside the other needs.

Phase 3: Making the Decision

1. Core Question

Can the group come to a decision that everyone can accept as their own?

2. Purpose

The purpose of this phase is to convert one of the proposals to a decision, or find some other combination of strategies that will amount to a decision. By now, groups usually have unleashed stores of energy through the trust and goodwill that emerge from the earlier phases. They *want* to find a solution, and they are generally committed to making it work for everyone.

The process is complete when everyone in the group is wholeheartedly willing to accept the decision as their own. The 'requirement' to find a solution that attends to all the needs, without giving up on anyone, unleashes co-creativity that transcends either/or options.

3. Evaluating a proposal

This skill is important because it provides the group with an efficient way to know which proposal meets the most criteria and is the one to start with for a decision or modification. If there's only one proposal, applying this skill supports the group in seeing quickly where further refinement is needed so the proposal has robust support.

In this phase, each proposal is evaluated against the entire list of criteria. The purpose of evaluation is not to make a decision. If there's only one proposal it's to see where sticking points still exist. If there are multiple proposals, evaluation helps the Facilitator figure out which proposal to start the decision-making process with.

You might start by saying: "Now we'll see how closely the (first) proposal attends to the criteria. We're not voting on adopting any proposal. We're seeing how closely the people in this group believe it comes to meeting the criteria and we're going to use that information as a jumping off point for decision-making. "

1. "Raise your hand if you believe this proposal attends to consideration 1." Then record the number of hands raised.
2. Now repeat for the other direction: "Raise your hand if you believe it doesn't." Again, record how many hands are raised.

Along the way, let people know, as needed, that if they see this proposal as neutral with regards to the criterion, or for any other reason don't know how to evaluate it, then they simply don't raise their hand in either direction. Also there is no need to agree on whether and how any proposal attends to any criteria; it's only people's perception of that which is being evaluated.

Evaluating a proposal (continued)

Ask the same questions for all the considerations, and then for other proposals if they exist. In the end, you may have a grid such as this:

Criteria/Considerations	Proposal A		Proposal B		Proposal C	
	Attends	Doesn't	Attends	Doesn't	Attends	Doesn't
Consideration 1	13	5	10	3	9	15
Consideration 2	10	4	5	4	12	3
Consideration 3	6	2	11	1	11	2
Totals	29	11	26	8	32	20

You are trying to find the proposal with the least opposition based on the following:

- Number of people who believe that a proposal attends to the list of criteria
- Number of people who believe that a proposal does not attend to the list
- A felt sense of the strength of objections based on previous steps of the process

In the example above, although proposal C has more people who see it as meeting needs, the level of concern about how well needs are met is high enough that proposal A appears like a better candidate to start with. If proposal C were the only one, then the place to zoom in on would be criterion 1, because that's where the prevalence of concerns appears to be.

When you are done deciding where you want to start, make this decision on your own, without involving the group, as the level of complexity about deciding on a proposal as a *process* decision before working with it as *content* is likely to be beyond most groups' capacity. Still, let them know why. Try to make everything be really practical and clear, not "right."

4. Breakthrough Insight: Inviting just enough dissent

When I work with groups to reach collaborative decisions, I focus on surfacing and engaging with dissent. It's a counterintuitive aspect of Convergent Facilitation: I overall want to know, and therefore to ask, where is the energy that wants to go a different direction from the proposal on the table, so that we can engage with it. This is a key feature of the process.

The key element in this phase for the facilitator is to know how much dissent to invite by asking questions that open more or less discussion. Once dissent is invited, working with the underlying needs that give rise to dissent and incorporating them into the solution that the group will adopt in the end is the art within this phase.

> Focusing on inviting dissent, and just enough of it, is key to efficient collaboration. It sidesteps the pressure to agree that so often bogs down a consensus process.

5. Gauging willingness/dissent-basic flow

Your fundamental task in this part of the process is to continually assess whether or not there is "enough" willingness in relation to any one proposal. Bear in mind that the proposals brought in from the proposal creation phase are only starting points, and may be completely discarded. You gauge the level of willingness, mostly, by finding out how much dissent there is.

This is the part of the process that is most like art and the least available to step by step instruction. It relies in an irreducible way on your intuition about what "enough" willingness is, and, therefore, what kind of question you will ask the group to gauge this. Because of this challenge, you can think of the entire section about gauging willingness/dissent as information to shape your intuition rather than as specific guidelines to follow.

Once you find and ask the question, if there is no dissent, then the decision is made, and all that's left is to recognize and celebrate that. If there is dissent, then you will need to engage with it. Engaging with dissent is vitally important for guiding the group towards true willingness to accept the decision rather than compromising. This is when you and the group can find out whether the group has sufficient resources to reach a collaborative decision and, if not, decide together how to handle this.

6. Gauging Willingness/dissent-setting thresholds

Dissent tells you how far away the people in the group are from making a truly collaborative decision. It's your main instrument for supporting groups in converging on a decision. I get group input by carefully crafted show-of-hands questions.

Some questions make it easy to express dissent. I call these *low-threshold questions*. Others make it hard, and I call them *high-threshold questions*. Lower threshold questions, by making it easy to dissent, encourage more discussion. Higher threshold questions make it harder for participants to dissent, thereby promoting a faster decision-making time.

There are two basic principles that you can use to guide your inner exploration of where to set the threshold:

- Set the threshold high enough that you can get the information you need with just one question, so that if your intuitive sense was correct, you might get a decision with one question only;
- Set the threshold low enough that if you misjudged willingness, there's an opportunity for the group to correct it.

Gauging Willingness/dissent-setting thresholds (continued)

In addition to those very broad principles, here are some more specific guidelines:

- **Your own openness:** Invite only as much dissent as you are truly prepared to engage with.
- **Group stamina:** How much stamina does the group have for remaining in uncertainty and continuing to explore options vs. how much urgency is there about reaching a decision?
- **Timeline within the process:** Early in the process you will want to lower your thresholds so you can have more creativity, and later in the process you are likely to raise the threshold.
- **Balance of numbers:** In general, the more people favoring the outcome, the higher the initial threshold. Beware, though, of the "tyranny of the majority."
- **Willingness to shift:** A lot of willingness to shift? Use a lower threshold and vice versa.
- **Group purpose:** If the group is in a production-oriented mindset, raise the threshold. If the issue at hand requires innovation, you would need to lower the threshold.
- **Trust:** If you are confident that people trust that their needs matter, then use a higher threshold. If you are working with a group where you have a concern that people may be timid or polite and accept a strategy that doesn't work for them, lower the threshold.
- **Length of consequences:** If there are only short term consequences, you are likely to want to reduce the amount of discussion with a higher threshold and vice versa.

High Threshold Questions
- How many people have too many concerns to give this proposal a try for six months?
- How many people would leave the group if this proposal were adopted?
- How many of you would find it challenging to participate in this project if we adopted this proposal?"
- How many of you have so much objection to this proposal as it currently stands that you are willing for the group to not reach a decision?

Medium threshold questions
- How many of you see how this proposal can benefit the company and nonetheless are concerned about at least some aspects of it?
- How many of you have concerns that might prevent you from accepting this proposal?
- In this moment, how many of you have concerns about the proposal that are important for you to address?

Low threshold questions
- How many of you have at least some aspect of the proposal that you're not super happy with?
- How many have a sense that you might accept the proposal yet it's less than ideal for you?
- How many of you believe that your initial preference is better than this proposal?
- How many people would have at least some disappointment if we adopted this?

7. Example: Changing the Threshold

This is an example of the power of changing the threshold. I was at a client site, and the CEO called his entire team of about 25 people into the room. He had just gotten a huge contract, bigger than the company had ever had, and was holding his hand in a gesture of being about to sign it. Then he said: "Is there anyone who's not ready for me to sign this contract?" I was totally unsurprised that no one said anything, even though I had reason to know that many were full of doubts about their capacity to deliver. What could I do, then? First I said: "I don't know if there is anyone who's not ready. What I do know is that the way you framed the question, it's unlikely anyone would feel free to say so." This was my way of telling the CEO that the threshold he picked was too high, and didn't leave room for enough dissent.

I then offered him a different threshold: "Does anyone have any concerns they would like addressed before I sign the contract?" This lower threshold lets people know that he is actually interested in their concerns, and, indeed, resulted in five hands going up right away, and several others later, in the course of the discussion that ensued.

The lowered threshold shifted the group into a collaborative exploration of the viability of the contract. As a result, some of the terms of the contract were changed before it was signed, reflecting an adaptation on the part of the CEO to what he was hearing. What's more, the sales person for the account voluntarily reduced his commission by 30% to improve the profit margins, because he was so impressed by the collaborative spirit. All of this emerged from just one change in a question!

I am sharing this example in the hopes that it will give you the wisdom to use these differences when you are the one choosing the threshold, and the courage to propose such changes to the person in power. In this case, part of the elegance was because the CEO – after many months of working with me – was receptive to my offer and the people stepped forward instantly as soon as the door opened. That is not always going to be the case. In many situations, you might need to engage both with the person in power and with those with less power in order to establish the basis of a productive collaboration.

8. Breakthrough Insight: Engaging with dissent as a gift

Instead of seeing the outlier as a problem, the way we are used to, I now see the outlier as the gift bearer – the person with issues, concerns, or ideas that are often essential for a group to consider, the one through whom they come to the group's awareness.

> Time and again I have seen that what drives a proposal forward towards improvement are the dissenting views. Because of this unusual relationship with dissent, proposals can change, even dramatically and as late as the last step, if new needs are identified.

There are no rules and no predefined outcome. This is an essential ingredient of collaborative facilitation: you keep moving towards where there is openness and willingness, until one of three things happens that, in the end, brings the group together:

a. the person or people dissenting relax and open their willingness to go with the proposal on the table;
b. the dissenters' energy shifts the previous majority and they are now ready to take the dissenting view on board;
c. the group as a whole creates something new – a third way – together, moving in another direction that takes everyone's needs into consideration.

Along the way, you may discover the magic I have encountered time and again, which is that as the group integrates the concerns of dissenters, the emerging proposal, with the amendments that keep being added, ends up improving the plan for everyone without losing anything.

Part of why is that this process continues to lean on the group's shared commitment to the whole. You are not the only one hearing the concerns. Everyone hears them, including those who liked the proposal. That affects everyone in the room. If you can continue to hold the practical and radical vision that this is not about who wins; that you are committed to bringing the entire group to a place where it works for everyone, then it will keep moving towards convergence.

Another reason why this works is that although people want their way to begin with, everyone is happy to have a decision that feels robust even if it's not their preference. We all know how demoralizing it is to have no decision or to be forced into one, and this is part of what motivates people to trust you and stretch.

9. Example 1: Dissenting Views

If the process is set up to be an either/or decision, the likelihood of successfully converging diminishes. It's way more likely that hybrid solutions will work. As an example, colleagues of mine were doing a training in Pakistan for Afghan refugees. The training was so successful, that people were bemoaning not having had such a training earlier which could have prevented some war or bloodshed. Being so moved, some of them spontaneously invited my colleagues to come to the mosque on Friday. Instantly, a few others were deeply offended about how anyone would dare invite people from the US to the mosque.

Sadly, within seconds they were having a big and heated argument. My colleagues slowed down the action, and supported everyone in expressing and hearing needs. At the end, they were left with what to do after everyone understood everyone's needs. Then, with all that knowledge, they were able to craft an elaborate path whereby my colleagues were able to get into the mosque and not be in view of the people praying. There would not have been a way to have everyone agree to the original "yes" or "no" debate, because there truly were needs, in either direction, that would not be met. It was only the ability to step out of the either/or paradigm that we are so used to that allowed the group to find a true solution.

Example 2

On another occasion, I was one of the facilitators for a five day training in a group that had three separate languages that required translation. I noticed that the group was getting bogged down with attempting to find a perfect solution for the translation issue, and I could see it wasn't going to happen. Instead, I brought the dilemma to the group – that aiming for a perfect solution would take more energy and effort away from the main focus of the group.

I proposed some elaborate arrangement that was clearly not ideal, and yet I could see that it would attend sufficiently to most of the needs and considerations I had heard. Then I took the crucial step of asking people to try it out and to bring it up again later if anyone felt it wasn't working. We completed the discussion and arrived at the imperfect solution – in a group of over 100 people – in less then thirty minutes, and, in the end no one ever brought up the question again. I had heard that in previous years of the same training the question kept coming up again and again and stimulated enormous pain because everyone was still busy looking for a perfect solution.

10. Drawing People Out

There are people who take longer to sort through information and needs, and sometimes they feel embarrassed, as if it's too late to express anything after they missed the window. There are others who don't want to rock the boat, who may have a strong opinion but don't want to vocalize it.

If you have any reason to believe, whether because of knowing anything about the group, or from your gut intuition, or based on your general experience in facilitation, that there are people who are not speaking, then it's vitally important for you to find a way to reach them.

How can you invite people to speak? For example: "I'm surprised that only one person has raised their hand… If you're not expressing what's on your mind, the decision will not be as robust. You will serve the group better by saying what's on your mind."

If you're not sure that people truly feel free, you might say something like: "I'm noticing that no one expressed an objection to what I'm proposing, and I'm actually feeling uneasy about it because I really want to make sure that if you accept this proposal it's because this is really something you can live with. I'd rather you raised an objection and we can work it out." Especially if this is a moment in which there is pressure to just produce a decision, wait, slow down, and ask again if necessary, until you are really sure. This way you convey to people that their needs matter.

As a last resort, this kind of situation is one of the exceptions to my concern about going around the room. People are more likely to express their opinions and concerns if everyone speaks. They may be withholding, still, and this is the limit of what you can do.

11.   When willingness is not emerging.

- If there is another proposal that hasn't been explored, you can pick it to work with.
- If the decision is truly critical to make, you might vary your threshold.
- If the impasse is due to running out of the contracted time that you have with the group, and you believe that convergence can still happen, you can ask for an extension of time.
- If nothing else seems like an option, you can get agreement from the group for other forms of decision.

If none of the above is a path that the group can agree to, the remaining possibility is simply and mournfully to invite the group to hold the dilemma with you – that, given the resources available to the group and the level of contention, no decision is emerging. There could still be magic even then, because this level of mirroring and shared holding is generative and illusion free.

Engaging with Outliers

1. Core Question

What gifts do these persons bring to the group?

2. Overview

In any of the phases of Convergent Facilitation, the presence of outliers – those who have dissenting views, who stand apart from the group, or in any other way are outside of a potential emerging agreement about anything – serves as a powerful invitation to transcending either/or and incorporating even more creativity. There is no assumption of majority vote that will determine things. Outliers give the group the gift of the opportunity to benefit from the full range of wisdom and perspectives that exist within it, and are often the catalysts for breakthrough moments.

Harvesting the wisdom of the outlier while maintaining the energy and good will of other people in the group is the facilitator's responsibility. You are more likely to succeed in this if you have clarity about how much power you want to exercise and the ability to initiate transitions with transparency are crucial. The next section addresses these two topics.

Outliers
- Contribute ideas other people haven't thought about
- Act as a lightning rod for testing the real support for proposals
- Say what other people feel uncomfortable saying
- Provide an opportunity for greater synergy as the group modifies the solution to integrate what the outlier says

If you want to share these materials, visit http://bit.ly/material-share for information about what we ask of you.

3. Using Power as a Facilitator

When you are the facilitator, especially an outside facilitator, usually people have some willingness to trust you initially because you are the person in authority. What this means, essentially, is that when you speak more weight is given to what you say than when others speak, all other things being equal. This power may change in the course of time, depending on your choices of how you use it, which can increase or decrease the trust that people have in your skill and in your care for their needs.

Being in clear choice about your use of power is an important aspect of your facilitation, because your power is a resource you can use for the benefit of the group. The most significant aspect of your power is that as a facilitator you are making choices every moment about what happens next– Will you be speaking or will you ask others to speak? When is a process finished? What threshold will you use? These are all decisions you make about how you use your power to guide people through a decision-making process. At any point in time, one of the decisions you make is the degree to which you involve the group in making decisions about the process, especially in moments of transition from something that is happening to something else.

4. Initiating transitions

At every moment of potential transition, it's part of your role as the facilitator to choose whether to continue or shift focus, and whether to make a unilateral decision about it or to involve the group in deciding what comes next through asking questions of the group.

The fundamental information that informs your choice about whether to continue or to transition, is the information that you are tracking: purpose, time, people, criteria/needs, and open loops along with an ongoing assessment of how the power relations within the group are playing out.

The possibilities for what to do when you notice something that you want to respond to are wide ranging, including a variety of actions, such as:

- Interrupt
- Ask someone to wait to speak
- Not address an issue that's come up
- Address something that's not on the agenda
- Move to the next item on the agenda

Initiating Transitions (continued)

Like everything else about facilitation, the first part is internal: you notice something that prompts you to want to make a transition; you figure out what you want to do about it; and you decide whether you want to make a unilateral decision or involve the individual or the group in the decision.

How do you know which way to go? There is no simple or "right" answer. There are no rules you can apply to know for sure. There are only some factors you can consider that will help you with experimenting and developing your own intuitive style and understanding. There are also no "wrong" choices. If you choose in a way that doesn't support the group, you will soon find out, and you can course correct. Note that the more relaxed you are about mistakes, the easier it is to gain the trust of the group for changing direction.

Some of the factors you might want to consider in making this decision include:
- How many people are likely to have a strong reaction to the decision.
- The magnitude and duration of the effect of the decision on an individual or on everyone in the group.
- The energy level of the group.
- How much you trust people in the group to speak up for their needs.
- How confident you are that you are making a contribution.

The more likely it is for a strong reaction to occur; the larger and/or longer the magnitude of the effect; the higher the level of energy in the group; the less I trust that people will speak up; and the less confident I am in the decision – the less likely I am to make the decision unilaterally. I am most likely to make a unilateral decision about process when I am confident that people will be fine with it; that the significance of the decision is minor; that the energy of the group is low; that people will speak up if they are not happy with the outcome; and that my decision is actually serving the group's purpose.

Even when you are making the decision unilaterally, if there is a shift in energy flow or focus, or if you are changing an agreed agenda or process, transparency will most often support you in retaining the trust of the group. In particular, let people know what has happened that's leading you to make a transition and what you are planning to do next, or what you want the group to do next. Most importantly, make it clear what your decision is and why you're making it, speaking as explicitly as possible about how this transition serves the group's purpose. There is usually more willingness from a group to support your choice when people know why you're doing something.

Closure

Although the goal of this process is convergence, its conclusion announces itself in the most indirect way possible: by an absence of hands going up when you invite dissent. The visual experience of this is minimal amount of energy, which is in stark contrast to the significance of the moment. As a result, this is a moment that's important for you to name and acknowledge explicitly; to let the group know that a decision has been reached and the process is complete.

Here's how you will usually arrive here:
- Decide what threshold of willingness/dissent to set
- Ask a question of the group that reflects that threshold
- If you get dissent, identify what's important
- Decide whether to raise the threshold or tweak the proposal
- If you tweak the proposal, check to see how many people believe the tweak makes the proposal better and how many believe it makes the proposal worse relative to the criteria/needs
- Check for willingness of the people in the group
- Check for willingness of dissenter(s)
- Decide where to ask for stretching, and repeat steps as necessary

1. Time Constraints

Overall, what you can do under time constraints is a combination of more rigorous application of all the tools to support efficiency that we have already covered as well as stronger invitations to stretch. It's even more important under time constraints to minimize discussion, because of the extreme unlikelihood, especially under time constraints, that a discussion will reach resolution. You do this by continually reminding people to speak only what hasn't been said; by stepping in more often to identify the noncontroversial essence; and by asking show-of-hand questions to move the process forward more quickly.

Absent time constraints, you and the group would generally be able to tolerate more disagreement and invite more needs and criteria into the process of generating proposals. That tends to result in a more robust and sustainable decision, precisely because of not requiring a lot of stretching. This is a trap for you as facilitator, because as wonderful as that experience is, aiming for that outcome under time constraints runs the risk of having no decision at all, which tends to be demoralizing for a group. Because of this, one of the most important things you can do as a facilitator under time constraints, is to strengthen the invitation to stretch into willingness, so that a decision can be made at all.

2. Key Points to Remember

The intentionality for connection, multiplicity of options, and freedom and power is directly built into the process that I have described.

First, creating a shared list of needs and principles is a way of overcoming separation. Doing it, and doing it consciously, brings people in the group together. It literally gives the message that people are not separate from each other; that they are engaged together in this task. That creates magic because it allows people to let go of having to hold on to something that's important to them.

Second, by continually asking what strategies can attend to all the needs, this process generates an experience of abundance for people. Instead of the habitual either/or, people realize that they have more options than just the one that works for them and the one that works for someone else. They recognize, even if slowly and without conscious clarity, that they are creating new options together.

Third, by continually inviting dissent into the room, people learn that they are not powerless. They realize that they are part of a whole, and that their own voice matters. They begin to believe that they can shape the outcome instead of being forced into something that they have no say about. Although in theory people always have the power to choose, the risk of consequences makes true choice beyond the reach of most of us most of the time. As a facilitator in this process, you can reduce the risk of consequences by varying the threshold. In how you ask the questions, you literally increase people's sense of power to participate.

This is one frame that you can hold for yourself, then. In any situation that you come into while facilitating that is not covered by what I shared with you, which is one way of saying almost all the time, you can ask yourself this simple and radical question: What can I do here, in the most conscious way that I know, to counter separation, scarcity, and powerlessness? If you do that, you are more likely to be moving towards fruitful, magical collaboration.

Attending to Power Differences

Power differences within the group add a layer of complexity and are almost always present. Those with less power are less likely to be part of the process unless you bring conscious attention and take deliberate action.

1. Strategies to Attend to Power in the Three Phases

Here's how the challenges show up in each phase and some general guidelines for how you can support full collaboration.

Phase 1: Ensuring a full criteria list

When people lack power, they are less likely to speak in the group and bring their perspective. What you can do, if you are aware of power differences – within the group, or even in relation to you – is to remove barriers to speaking. If the group is small, risk redundancy by inviting every person to say what's important to them. In larger groups, you might invite people explicitly.

Phase 2: Supporting the creativity necessary for the outcome

People with less power, especially those whose life experience leaves them without power and say in society, are less likely to participate in the nitty gritty aspects of proposal creation. What you can do if you notice such dynamics in the group is one or more of the following:

- For part of the time, break the group into pairs, where it's easier to speak and harder to disappear.
- Amplify what you hear from people with less power when they do participate. Engage with them fully. State how you see what they've said contributes to the process.
- Ask lots of questions designed to elicit ideas, and direct them at different people all the time
- Engage with those in power to create an explicit larger opening for creative ideas from all.

Phase 3: Surfacing dissent

When people don't trust that their opinion matters, they are less likely to speak it. When they are afraid of negative consequences, they are less likely to express dissent. Since the point of Convergent Facilitation is an outcome that works for all rather than a quick "yes" from everyone that isn't a true agreement, the success of the whole process depends on your ability to surface and handle dissent.

Accordingly, you will want to find ways to lower the Threshold of Dissent for those who may not otherwise acknowledge discomfort with proposals. For example: "Here's the proposal that Jenny has created. I would love it if you could poke some holes in it, because that will give us more confidence, in the end, that the decision will be sound and include everyone's input. Or you could even devise a dual threshold: "I would like to hear only from the field workers; I want to give more weight to your concerns because you will be the ones carrying out the plan."

Final Words

Convergent Facilitation is a labor of love and an exacting discipline of the mind. It has the potential to support unprecedented transformation even in intractable conflicts because it brings together the heart quality of immense and uncompromising care with the meticulous attention to efficient use of resources so as to move the process forward towards a truly workable solution. It is my greatest hope that this summary provides you with sufficient motivation to support your own experiments and to seek further training. Developing processes for collaboration is, in and of itself, a collaborative process, and it will take many of us experimenting, learning, and sharing the results to get to where the tide turns and collaboration in decision-making becomes the norm.