The role of facilitator is to help groups to form more quickly and effectively than otherwise might be the case.

Facilitation: Providing Opportunities for Learning

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Establishing Roles

Whenever groups meet, the people forming the group tend to arrive with certain assumptions about the roles of the various participants. These assumptions vary, depending on the reasons for which the group has gathered.

Discovering what these assumptions are, and the expectations that stem from them, is an important formative process. One approach is for the group to meet and allow the roles of the individuals to emerge as the group interaction proceeds. This is an exciting and illuminating approach, but can for some people be extremely difficult and far too challenging. Another approach is for the facilitator to guide the group through a process of role clarification.

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I tend to use three different approaches, depending on the circumstances. I usually wait to decide what to do until the group meets. But sometimes I might decide on an opening approach when I am thinking about working with the group in advance of the first meeting. These three approaches are to:

(1) allow the group to meet and to interact in an unstructured, non-directed way;

(2) encourage the group to explore their individual reasons for being there, and to consider the roles that they expect everyone will play;

(3) start by introducing myself and explaining the way I see my role in the group, and what I expect from group members. I follow this by asking the individuals to introduce themselves and say what they think about group roles.

The important aspect of determining roles is to allow the group the space and time to clarify what is expected of them, and what they expect of others. One way to do this is for participants to work in pairs and to share their expectations with their partner. Each person takes a turn and then the pairs return to the main group and share what they discovered about the similarities and differences in their expectations. This need not necessarily take more than a few minutes, and only happens when the group first meets or if a new member joins the group.

This was the first meeting of the group. Joe who was assisting me, had previously asked me how we would start. I suggested that we took a completely unstructured approach.

We had arranged a circle of chairs in the library, choosing this pleasant comfortable room rather than one of the Spartan "lecture" rooms. We were expecting ten participants at this facilitation skills workshop.

It was 6 p.m. on a Sunday evening at the start of a five-day workshop. I arrived in the library to find five people sitting in the prearranged chairs. I said hello and joined them, Joe was already there. People drifted in, and within five minutes the chairs were full. There was some nervous chatter going on. Joe and I sat quietly waiting.

After about three minutes of silence, which was growing heaving and heavier, a rather tense looking man in suit and tie said "Well, what are we waiting for?".

Joe asked him what he thought he was waiting for, and in an irritated way he said; "I'm waiting for someone to start this workshop".

"What do you think we should do?", I asked.

"Well, at least we could introduce ourselves", he said.

This suggestion was followed by a lively 30 minutes during which everyone introduced themselves to the group.

After the introductions I asked the group what they would like to do next. The same rather "stiff" man, who we now

knew was called Derek, said he would like to know why we were working in the library and not in one of the excellent training rooms. I suggested that perhaps we needed to sort out one or two things, like where we were going to work, when people wanted to start and finish and so on. Derek was looking rather annoyed and anxious.

"Why don't you just tell us and give us the programme?" he stated, in a very challenging way.

I didn't reply, and Joe said that we intended to look at the programme later, and that perhaps we could resolve some of the outstanding issues by discussing in pairs how we wanted the workshop to be to get what we wanted from it. The group was very willing and relieved to receive even this gentle form of direction.

Even at this stage in the group's formation certain roles were beginning to appear. Joe and I can be seen as the facilitators, and we have taken the role of guides. Derek has clearly appointed himself as the person who will question what is happening, in the apparent hope of receiving some direction. It is debatable whether we needed to take the role definition further at this stage, unless the group decided they wanted to do so.

It is probable that most people have an idea of what they expect the facilitator to do, and/or be responsible for, in the group. Establishing what this is can be a very useful and informative exercise for a group to carry out. What is almost certain to emerge is that individuals have different expectations, which seem to me to be linked to their personal needs for help, support and protection in the group process.

It is tempting to define the role of the facilitator and to follow this with a list of desirable attributes, but I am not going to give way to this temptation. What I will say is that facilitators have to remember always that whenever a group meets there is a group process that comes into being. This process belongs to the group. It is a combination of the living processes of all the people in the group and has to be respected.

> Remember that you are facilitating another person's process. It is not your process. Do not intrude. Do not control. Do not force your own needs and insights into the foreground. If you do not trust a person's process, that person will not trust you[1].

It is my intention that by the time you have reached the end of the article you will be able to assess for yourself what the skills and attributes are for good facilitation. The great problem that I have with defining facilitation in these terms is that what is appropriate, and works in one situation, will fail completely in another. There is no alternative but to concentrate completely on what is happening and to respond as seems most appropriate at the time.

There are moments, especially at the start of a group, when what is happening is stimulated by a suggestion

from the facilitator. This is a very useful way to encourage the group to become involved in the group process.

> When the group returned from the discussion in pairs I left it for Joe to ask what they wanted to share with the group. There was much animated discussion as the various pairs told us what they had decided was important, and at Margaret's suggestion a list was prepared on a flip chart that Derek brought into the library from one of the training rooms.

> Using the list as a focus, the group decided which room we would work in; the times we would start and finish (at least as a guide); what they expected from Joe and me, and what they were prepared to do themselves. When this process seemed to have been completed I asked the group what they wanted to do next. After some discussion, in which Derek and Margaret said the most, it was agreed that we would move into the selected room.

> When we did this, the group, under Melanie's leadership, rearranged the chairs in a circle. We sat down and Michael said, "OK, so what happens now?"

At this stage in the group formation individual roles and interactions are beginning to appear. This can now be allowed to develop. The exercise has served several purposes. It has given every participant an opportunity to say what they think about what they need and expect from the facilitators. It has given them an opportunity to start to take responsibility for the things the group does and how the group does them; and it has provided an opportunity for a group process to begin to grow.

If we had chosen to approach the issue of roles by setting out what we believed the roles to be, we would no doubt have generated discussion as participants chose to agree, to disagree, or to say nothing, but we would not have allowed the group process to flow. Our approach would have been more of a block to the group development than an aid.

I can recall a time, not that long ago, when I would have been insisting on spelling out roles carefully so that everyone was clear. But trying to avoid confusion in this way generally serves to prevent group development, and allows little space for contact between participants and between participants and facilitators.

A great deal of what I am going to be saying in this article is about contact, and how good contact can lead to the building of an effective human environment in which people can grow and develop. Perhaps establishing, or at least helping the group to establish, such an environment is the key role of the facilitator.

I never find it easy to make a decision about the clarification of roles, and there can be occasions when there are many roles other than those of facilitator and participant. When this occurs I still believe in

encouraging the group to sort out whatever clarity they need.

One large group I was a member of, as a participant, had the following roles being played out: facilitator, co-facilitator, assistant facilitator, support group leaders, support group assistants and participants. The support group leaders and assistants were also participants. The usefulness of trying to spell out these individual roles and of doing so in a way that participants would remember and find helpful is highly debatable.

The important aspect of this question for me is whether the individuals fulfilling these different roles understand and can explain, if needed, the role they expect to carry out. However, even this is less important than the overriding need for people, whatever their role, to be attentive to, and aware of, what is happening in the group.

Here are the three key requirements that I always consider I have to meet when I am facilitating a group:

(1) provide opportunities for the group to go in the direction that they want, or seem to want, to go in;

(2) constantly be aware of what is happening in the group;

(3) stay quiet and be attentive to the needs of the individual participants in the group.

By doing these three things I can serve the group and ensure that the energy is focused on group needs.

Facilitation Defined

Facilitation is a word which describes an activity. It is something that someone does. It is a process. Yet it also includes non-action, silence and even the facilitator's absence.

Carl Rogers in his book *The Freedom to Learn*, talked about people having freedom to "learn what we wish as we wish". For this to happen the right atmosphere has to be developed so that the facilitator can concentrate on providing the resources and opportunities for learning to take place, rather than "manage and control" learning. Here is how Rogers described one of his courses and his role as facilitator:

> This course has the title "Personality Theory". But what we do with this course is up to us. We can build it around the goals we want to achieve, within that very general area. We can conduct it the way we want to. We can decide mutually how we wish to handle these bugaboos of exams and grades. I have many resources that I have on tap to be available, and I can help you find others. I believe I am one of the resources, and I am available to you to the extent that you wish. But this is our class. So what do we want to make of it?[2].

The word facilitate comes from the Latin *facilis* which means "to make easy". The dictionary definitions vary. Here are three:

(1) "To free from difficulties and obstacles, to make easy."

(2) "To lessen the labour of."

(3) "To render easier, to promote, help forward."

None of these satisfies me, nor do they hint at the empowerment of individuals to achieve for themselves, and it is this latter aspect which is for me the key to facilitation.

> At dinner on Monday evening the group energy was high, and there was an air of fun and excitement. I was sitting next to Derek and Melanie. Derek, in contrast to everyone else, was still dressed formally in suit and tie and wearing his badge. Several comments were made in his direction about relaxing and being stuffy. Derek turned to me and said, "Is there any rule about dress?".
>
> "No", I replied, "you can wear what you want. Why do you ask?"
>
> "Well, on the courses I run we usually wear a jacket and tie for dinner", he answered.
>
> I told him that I never set any rules about dress, behaviour, drinking, etc. I explained that I believed that individuals are quite able to make their own decisions about such things. Then he asked me if I had noticed his badge.
>
> "Yes, I have. Why?"
>
> "Well, I believe it is important that we are able to identify each other easily", he responded, "and you don't seem to agree".
>
> "Oh, but I do agree with you. However, I believe that it is important that we make good contact with each other, and badges act as barriers to good contact. Without a badge", I continued, "everyone has to ask, and learn who the other people are. If I can avoid this by reading your badge I am avoiding making contact with you. So in order to facilitate good contact I don't use badges".
>
> Melanie, who had been listening, said, "So sometimes to facilitate something to happen you do nothing".
>
> "Yes", I replied, "and this is perhaps the most important thing to learn about facilitation".

It puzzles people at first, to see how little the able leader actually does, and yet how much gets done.

There are many similarities between what people often describe as leadership and facilitation. These similarities are to do with the way that the process is carried through. However, for some people leadership means being able to direct and move a group in a direction which the leader decides is appropriate. This is only one form of leadership. It is sometimes useful but is often not very effective.

Facilitation is about empowering people to take control and responsibility for their own efforts and achievements. If we grow and develop as people, we do so because we make a choice to do so. We cannot be "developed" by others. Good leaders know this. In about 500BC, Lao Tzu is believed to have written the *Tao Teh Ching*. It describes a philosophy for life, "The Way". Here is Chapter 17, about leadership:

> A leader is best
> when people barely know that he exists,
> not so good when people obey and acclaim him,
> worst when they despise him.
> "Fail to honour people,
> they fail to honour you",
> but of a good leader, who talks little,
> when his work is done, his aim fulfilled,
> they will all say, "We did this ourselves"[3].

Facilitation echoes this message from Lao Tzu by trying to determine "the way" that the groups want to go, and by trying to encourage and support them in this process. This does mean sometimes leading from the front, but it is how we do this rather than what we are doing which is important. Sometimes we have to lead from within the group, by example and participation rather than persuasion. And there are times when it is important to lead from the back, to follow, and by following willingly and with skill to enable the group to lead.

In his book *The Tao of Leadership*, John Heider, building on the writing of Lao Tzu, says:

> What we call leadership consists mainly of knowing how to follow. The wise leader stays in the background and facilitates other people's process[1].

Following is not something which comes naturally. We have to learn to follow. Those of us who learn well will acquire the style, attitude and ability to lead. The skills of followership that we need to learn are described below.

Listening in an open and quiet way. This enable me to hear what is happening and to be aware of the feelings and emotions that lie behind what others are saying. It also gives me a basis for the choices that I can make about what is happening, how it is happening and what I might want to do.

Questioning in an enquiring and learning way. When I do this, and when I listen quietly and attentively to the replies, I am able to learn and understand what is happening. This then gives me the knowledge to make choices about what I do.

Communicating my thoughts, feelings and ideas clearly about what is happening. I am unable to do this unless I listen to and understand what is happening. When I do this I can contribute and share whatever I believe might be of help. It also gives me a sense of freedom to act as I think appropriate.

Acting in my chosen way and in the best interests of those I am with, so as to achieve shared objectives. When I act I choose, and take responsibility for what I do. This choice is based on my clear understanding of what is happening and on the clarity with which I express my thoughts, feelings and emotions about what is happening.

Receiving what is happening. This is particularly relevant after I have acted, so that I can assess what changes my action has had on what is happening. This reviewing process is concerned with listening, questioning and communicating with others about what is happening *now*. By constantly checking what is happening in the here and now I can stay grounded in the present rather than keep replaying the past, or fantasizing about the future.

Adapting to the changing conditions in which I am living and working. When I am aware of how things are changing I can choose to adapt my actions accordingly. This allows me the freedom to change my mind and to adjust what I do to suit the particular needs of the moment rather than stick to previously relevant, but no longer appropriate, ideas.

When I am aware of how things are changing I can choose to adapt my encouraged to follow, and so we all share in the leadership. If we accept that everyone has their own process which they have developed as a means of being and surviving, then we need to acknowledge that process and to work with it, not against it. This means that the six elements of followership described above come into operation continuously whenever we make contact with others.

By learning how to follow I am learning how to relate and hence how to lead. Nothing could be more important for the facilitator who wants to give people the opportunity to grow and develop their potential. Or as John Heider puts it: "The wise leader is of service: receptive, yielding, following. The group members' vibration dominates and leads, while the leader follows".

> It was 9.15 a.m. on Tuesday morning. The group had assembled on time. One or two people seemed a little worse for wear after a later night. Joe and I decided to sit quietly and wait for the group to take the lead. We didn't have to wait long.
>
> "Well I feel like a nice quiet start to the day". It was Sid speaking. He was looking tired and decidedly fragile.
>
> "How would you like it to be then?", I asked him.
>
> "I don't really know, but something not too demanding".
>
> "Why don't you do what you've planned for today?", Derek interjected.
>
> "What makes you think I have planned something?", I asked.

"You must've done, you can't run a course without planning every session".

"I agree", David added. "You must know what we are going to do next."

"OK", I responded. "If I did have a plan, what do you think would be the next thing I had planned we should do?"

Michael sighed, "Here we go again", he said, "throwing the ball back to us".

"Well it is your workshop, and we do have an agenda that you created, so what do you want to do?", I asked the group.

"I would er...like to have a er...better understanding of what facilitation is, er...if that's OK". It was Gregory speaking.

"Yes, that would be very useful", Margaret added.

"Well that seems like a reasonable suggestion. Does everyone agree?", I asked. No one appeared to dissent.

"Now I suppose you will ask us how we want to do it", Derek stated.

"Yes, that's pretty much what I was thinking", I replied. "Has anyone any ideas?"

At this point in the workshop it might appear preferable for me as facilitator to suggests ways in which we could deal with the understanding of facilitation. But you will notice that no one has asked me for my ideas yet. If I make suggestions before I am invited to by the group I am pushing, which is exactly what I don't want to do.

In fact, I have prepared in advance for the workshop, but I have not planned a programme. I have planned to make available lots of ideas and materials that can be used if the group want to make use of them. If I offer these in advance of the group requesting help and support then I am disempowering the group from finding their own way. It is the struggle that is important, not the resolution, though we do want to reach a satisfactory completion of each topic.

The group debated a number of ideas and then Doreen turned to me and quietly asked me if I had any ideas on how they could do it.

"Yes I do have several options", I said. The group went quiet as I suggested that we could work in pairs, and each pair could select a topic from the agenda and facilitate a session on that topic for the rest of the group.

"But we need to know about facilitation first", Margaret said. "I don't want to look a fool."

Several people nodded in agreement with Margaret.

"But what do you think of the idea?", I asked.

There was general agreement that it was OK as long as they received some input on facilitation.

"OK, then why don't you select a partner, and choose a topic from the agenda?", I suggested. "As far as input about facilitation is concerned there is a paper on the table which I have written about facilitation skills. In addition, when you have thought about how you are going to facilitate your session you can, if you want, talk to me and Joe about it."

At this stage in the facilitation process I am working from within the group, or perhaps I am leading from just in front of the group. However, and this is the key, the group is going where it wants to go and using me as a resource to help it get there. In addition, the group working in pairs, are now going to select what topics they address and how they do it. They are in effect taking control and responsibility for the direction and shape of the next day or so of the workshop.

In the paper I had prepared for the workshop I included the following (my own) definition of facilitation: facilitation is the provision of opportunities, resources, encouragement and support for the group to succeed in achieving its objectives, and to do this through enabling the group to take control and responsibility for the way they proceed.

To empower people is to help them to believe in themselves, and from this base to explore their potential. Once this process starts it is difficult to return to a position where control can be exercised by the facilitator. In truth, facilitation is not relinquishing control to the group, because the facilitator never had control in the first place, but rather the recognition and acceptance that the group are in control from the very beginning, even if they have to be reminded that this is the case.

Listening

"Lots of people talk to animals", said Pooh.

"Maybe, but..."

"Not very many listen, though", he said.

"That's the problem", he added.

Listening is one of the facilitator's most useful tools. Our ability to hear is one of our five primary senses, and as such is vitally important to the way in which we interact with our environment. Our hearing is always switched on. People who have impaired hearing are locked out of part of the rich environment of sound in which we exist. Most of the time we mentally select, from the enormous range of sounds, those which we choose to pay attention to. This process of choice is what we mean by the word "listening". The dictionary describes the word "listen" as:

To hear attentively; to give ear to; to pay attention to.

To make an effort to hear something.

To apply oneself to hearing something.

These all imply making some effort to pick out from the babble of sounds those which interest us.

For facilitators listening is combined with all their other senses to try to make sense constantly of what is happening. So though I talk here solely about listening, I am doing so in the context of total sensory attention. Listening is the other end of speaking. Is there any point in speaking if there is no one to listen? There is a well-known Zen question: if a tree falls in a forest, and there is no living creature to hear it, does it make any sound? So, presumably, when we speak, our intention is that someone else should listen to us. This could be one person, a few or many. And the way in which we listen will depend on who is speaking, why they are speaking, what they are saying and our current interest.

For facilitators there are probably six main situations, described below, in which they will have to listen. In each of these, the objective of the listening will differ.

Monologue: one person talks, extensively and continuously, without any apparent interest in whether people listen. This is more a process of saying what I want to say. In this situation facilitators have to listen for the underlying message or reason for the monologue.

Dialogue: I see this as the exchange of thoughts, feelings, ideas and opinions between two or more people. The key to listening in this situation is to grasp what the other person is saying so that a relevant response can be made. There is an implied process of taking turns to speak and listen.

Conversation: is less formal than dialogue and seems to be an opportunity for people to engage in sharing information. There is no particular need to respond to what someone else has said, nor to talk about the same things, though there is usually some link between what people are saying. For facilitators, the aim is to try to define the central theme of the conversation.

> "Not conversing", said Eeyore. "Not first one and then the other. You said 'hallo' and flashed past, I saw your tail in the distance as I was meditating my reply. I had thought of saying 'What' – but, of course, it was then too late."
>
> "Well I was in a hurry."
>
> "No give and take", Eeyore went on. "No exchange of thought: 'Hall' – 'What' – I mean, it gets you nowhere, particularly if the other person's tail is only just in sight for the second half of the conversation."

Discussion: I consider a discussion to be a focused conversation about a particular topic. It is an opportunity for people to offer their views. Facilitators need to listen for the consensus, and to pick out the various themes, i.e.

the essence of the group's views. In addition, it is important to notice where differences exist between group members.

Debate exists when there are particular views being expressed for and against some particular theme. The debate might be an organized one, or one that arises from a discussion, but facilitators have to spot the difference. In a debate, facilitators need to be impartial and to attempt to see that everyone is able to speak if they wish, and not just the loudest.

Argument usually occurs as the final expression of contrasting views between two or more people. When agreement has not been reached, and if it is important to the parties engaged in the debate that their views hold sway, then we have an argument. In this situation, facilitators have to listen clearly to what each party is saying and try to define some common ground. Facilitators should not take sides, but remain respected listeners who can summarize and reflect back the relevant positions of the parties.

In all six situations, facilitators can choose the level at which they listen. Other members of the group will also be choosing the level at which they listen, and it is helpful for facilitators to be aware of this as well.

> When the group reassembled on Monday afternoon we drew lots to see which pair would go first. Much to their surprise it was to be Doreen and Melanie. I asked if there was anything that they wanted from Joe and me, and from the group. The only request they made was that we should concentrate on thinking about giving them positive feedback when they finished.
>
> Doreen started the session with a brief description of what they were going to do. After a few minutes Melanie started shouting and banging a saucepan with a spoon. Naturally it was impossible to hear what Doreen was saying. Then they both stopped and asked us what had happened.
>
> "Doreen, was talking and then you started making a din so that we couldn't hear her", Derek said to Melanie. "Yes, well, that's what happened, but for me", said Greg, 'it showed how our listening can be interrupted by distracting noises". "And it also demonstrated how hard it can be to listen", added Sid.
>
> "OK", Melanie said, "we want you to form small groups – say three groups of four. We will join in as well. Try to consider ways in which our listening can be interrupted, and then report back in, say, 15 minutes".
>
> We subdivided the group and departed to our task.

Now this subject of interruptions is very important, and we shall return to it later when the groups report back. Before then I should like to consider some of the ways in which we listen. My first point is that we hear with our ears and we listen with our minds. It is our minds which select the sounds we want to listen to, and which interprets what the words mean to us. Several people can

hear the same word or sound and give it a quite different meaning.

> To demonstrate a point, then, let's consider the implications to various people of a train whistle penetrating the evening dusk.

> To the saboteur crouching in a culvert it might signify the failure of his mission...To the playboy it might presage the imminent arrival of the transgressed husband. To the fireman in the cab of the locomotive it indicates a drop in steam pressure and the need for re-stoking the furnace. To the lonely wife it means the return of her travelling husband. To the man with his foot caught in the switch down the track it preshadows doom...for another (preparing to retire) it signifies a time for prayer...In brief, the nature and significance of information are primarily functions of the attitudes, situations, and relevant responsibilities with respect thereto of the people involved with it....

I believe this is the basis of the old saying that "we hear what we want to hear". So listening is a very personal thing that individuals do in a way which suits them at each moment. I have found from experience that people chose to listen at different levels of intensity, and that within a group at any one time different people could be listening at different levels.

I have divided listening into eight levels:

(1) *Non-listening* occurs when people are engaged with something else that is happening in the immediate environment. It might be talking to someone, or more than one person might be speaking, or it might be because of some distraction. This could include listeners being concerned with their own thoughts or preparing to say something. The end result is the same: the message being delivered is not received.

(2) *Passive listening* is a frequent occurrence in almost all contact between people. It can be described as hearing the words, but not the message. It occurs mainly in monologue, conversation and discussion, because listeners do not need to respond and can choose to be passive rather than attentive to the speaker.

(3) *Judgemental listening* happens when we interpret what we hear according to our own prejudices and biases. It is very difficult not to do this. As John Heider says:

> The leader judges no one and is attentive to both "good" and "bad" people. It does not even matter whether a person is telling the truth or lying.

I personally have great difficulty listening to people making racist or sexist comments. I want to respond immediately and "put them straight". But as a facilitator, my role is to listen attentively and put my feelings on temporary hold.

(4) *Attentive listening* is perhaps the level at which facilitators try to operate all the time. It is difficult and very tiring to maintain a state of attentive listening for more than 30 minutes without a break. For most people the time span of attention is well below this, and is probably no more than five or ten minutes. Attentive listening means being fully aware of speakers; what they are saying; how they are saying it, i.e. the tone and pitch of voice; what they are doing, i.e. gestures, movements, posture etc.; and receiving and interpreting the message they are sending. This is very demanding and takes considerable practice and experience to acquire.

(5) *Visual listening* is linked to attentive listening, but is used when the words are strange, e.g. in a foreign language, or when the message is unspoken. The eyes feed the brain with the messages they pick up from movement, expressing, behaviour, gesture, etc. For facilitators the eyes can also pick up activity in the group that surrounds the speaker being listened to. This also provides information about other people's reactions to what is being said. Visual listening is deepest with eye contact, and can also let speakers know that they are being "heard".

(6) *Reflective listening* help speakers and listeners to confirm that what is being said is being "heard" in the desired way. Listeners listen attentively and then ask speakers to pause while they re-state what they think that have "heard". This can then be confirmed or corrected by speakers so that the message is fully understood. Reflecting has to be done with care so that words are not "put into" the speaker's mouth, but rather that the same words are reiterated in the way they are understood by the listener. This is a skill that is acquired through practice.

(7) *Active/creative listening* involves attentive listening, and includes suggestions by the listener about what the speaker is trying to say. This level of listening does put words into the speaker's mouth. Listeners guess what the speaker is saying and then they suggest in their own words what they think the speaker means. Sometimes active listeners give speakers space so that they can agree or disagree with the listener's suggestions. Sometimes no space or time is given and the active listener's view is taken to be that of the speaker. Facilitators have to watch for this happening in the group and make sure that speakers have the opportunity to agree or disagree.

(8) *Directive listening* means interrupting speakers to get them to say what the listener wants to hear them say. Speakers are not given any opportunity to reply, and directive listeners go on to add their own extra emphasis. Directive listeners use a number of ploys, but the favourite is to say, "I

agree with you that..." and then they go on to add something that the speaker did not say, or mean. Facilitators need to be aware when this is happening and ensure that speakers have the opportunity to reply, and/or repeat what they did say.

It is not sufficient for facilitators simply to listen attentively and visually. It is also important to clarify what is being said by reflective listening, and to watch to see what other levels of listening are occurring in the group. This combination of listening to speakers and being aware of the listening that others are doing is what I describe as facilitative listening. It calls for a very high degree of concentration and awareness of what is happening in the group.

> When the small groups returned, Doreen and Melanie asked how we wanted to proceed. Sid was the first to speak. He suggested someone should make a list of the ways we saw listening being interrupted.

> Melanie agreed and the feedback continued. After some time, Melanie had covered two sheets of flip paper with statements made by the groups. Many of these seemed to overlap, and some statements said the same things in different words. I asked the group if there was some way that we could summarize what we had. Greg suggested that we could sort all the statements into similar groups and then name the groups. This was agreed and took about five minutes to complete. At this point Doreen and Melanie said their session was ended.

For me the interesting aspect of the exercise was the way that the focus was on interrupting listening rather than how to listen. The outcome has five categories of interruptions.

Distractions can be visual and aural, and either within the group environment, or from outside. Such distractions will have a greater effect when listeners are tired and/or uninterested. The answer is to reduce, as far as possible, the likelihood of distractions occurring.

Speaking is not the easiest way to communicate. People often have difficulty in converting their ideas into words. As Kahil Gibran says: "And in much of your talking, thinking is half murdered". People are often unable to articulate clearly, and wander around the point. The way words are spoken and the voice, its pitch, pace and range, all affect the listeners' ability to listen. When other people speak, listeners have to choose who to listen to, because we cannot listen to two people at the same time, even though we can hear hundreds.

Physical needs also interrupt. If we are hungry, thirsty, cold, hot, need to visit the toilet, or are tired we will need to satisfy the need before we can listen well. Facilitators need to be aware of these factors and to provide the opportunity for people to satisfy physical needs before proceeding.

Intellectual needs will interrupt listening in imperceptible ways. Interest is lost slowly until we realize we "haven't heard a word". Now, when I miss something I say, "Sorry I wasn't listening, could you repeat what you just said please?", which is better than transferring the blame to the speaker by saying "I didn't hear". We also stop listening when we are trying to work out what to say next. We cannot work on words in our minds and listen at the same time. Boredom is an extreme lack of interest and can lead very quickly into daydreaming; into ways of distracting others; and finally into sleep.

Emotional needs can take many forms, most of which are associated with our prejudices and feelings. When we are listening to someone speak, it is possible that what we hear can trigger prejudicial and/or emotional responses. The feeling thus generated, interrupts our ability to listen well to the speaker. This is probably not the fault of the speaker, but rather some re-stimulation of old hurts and messages which we still carry with us. Unless we are able to recognize our feelings for what they are, we will not "hear" the speaker's message. Facilitators have to try to develop the ability to step outside their "stuff" and continue to listen attentively to the message. This takes considerable skill and high levels of personal awareness.

Listening is one of those special skills which mean, because we can hear, we tend to believe that we can automatically listen. Yet for many people hoping to facilitate, listening will be the most difficult skill to master. As I write this I am remembering one of today's well-worn cliches, often used by those who are not listening: "I hear what you are saying, but..." My response to this is to interrupt them and ask, "Well could you tell me what you think I have been saying?". When they try to do this it is often clear that they have not been listening to a word I have said.

Using Conflict

> There is no such thing as a problem without a gift for you in its hand.

> You seek problems because you need their gifts[4].

Most of us are aware of moments of conflict which we face. Sometimes these are concerned with "inner" conflict, when our emotions, desires, feelings and thoughts conflict with what we want, or think it is OK for us to do. Many people have such "inner" conflict around issues such as eating, and drinking alcohol. But we also meet conflict outside ourselves when we come into contact with people, ideas and situations which we find clash with our own ideas, attitudes and wants.

The dictionary defines conflict in both the inner and outer sense:

> Inner struggle resulting from the opposition of irreconcilable impulses, desires, or tendencies.

> The clash of opposing ideas, interests, or forces; disagreement; opposition.

This separation between "inner" and "outer" conflict is a somewhat artificial distinction. Our "inner" conflicts stem from our past interactions with our environment which have become embedded in our personality. We have taken in what we should and should not do, and we have been given clear messages about how we should or should not behave. This conditioning affects the way we respond inside to what is happening outside.

"Outer" conflict is that which is presented to us by our current, "here and now" environment. Though it is coming from outside it is opposing what we have come to believe from years of parental, educational and social conditioning. It is therefore inextricably linked to the "inner" conflicts that we have with ourselves. The major difference between the two is that "outer" conflicts can be seen by others, while our "inner" conflicts can remain hidden inside.

> The aim is to shift the "inner conflict", that between impulse and the counter attacking resistance into an open, aware conflict[5].

Conflict is a frequent visitor to group work and is, I believe, an essential feature of human relations. For many people the first reaction to conflict is one of dismay and disappointment. It triggers the "fight or flight" instinct which we all possess. Some people choose to stand their ground and others take appropriate avoiding action. In fact, we have become very good at techniques of avoidance. But if we do this, we avoid not only conflict, but also contact. When working in groups, people find it more difficult to take avoiding action that they might in daily life. However:

> The well-run group is not a battlefield of egos. Of course there will be conflict, but these energies become creative focus[1].

For facilitators, the aim is to try to focus on the creative aspect of both "inner" and "outer" conflict, and to do this by a process of encouraging people to explore the conflict in a safe supportive environment, without protecting those involved.

There is a widely held belief that conflict is bad. In their book *Gestalt Therapy*, Perls *et al.* suggest why conflict is seen as bad before going on to describe how conflict can be harnessed as a powerful medium for growth:

- all conflicts are bad because they waste energy and cause suffering;
- all conflicts excite aggression and destruction, which are bad;
- some conflicts are bad because one of the contestants is unhealthy or anti-social, and rather than being allowed to conflict, it should be eliminated or sublimated[5].

If we as facilitators believe that conflict is bad then we will watch for it, and either try to prevent its appearance, or when it does appear, attempt to remove it, or reduce it. This would eliminate an opportunity for real and significant personal growth for everyone involved.

Conflict appears in a variety of costumes. It can be soft and gentle, gradually nudging someone towards the cliff edge. It can be harsh and direct and rush at you unexpectedly. It can be sneaky, and creep up on you. It seems that conflict has almost as many faces as we do. But there is always one thing in common, and that is the spark of opposition. Where the spark of opposition appears I know we have a conflict brewing. The spark does not always show up as an aggressive resistance. The resistance might be passive, but resistance there will be.

At this point, when the conflict is apparent in the emergence of resistance, facilitators have to be very careful not to be tempted by the invitations of those involved to take sides. Facilitators always have to remain neutral. If we do not then we cannot manage the process and the conflict is likely to disintegrate into a damaging chaos.

> On Monday evening when the group broke for dinner there was still a sense of conflict in the air. I asked Joe what he thought and he suggested that we have a session after dinner to resolve it.

> We assembled after dinner as usual. I had not mentioned anything about my discussion with Joe to the group. Joe and I sat quietly waiting.

> "What are we waiting for?" Derek said, looking at me. I said nothing.

> "We come in here, we sit down, and nothing, just silence. It's not what I call leadership", he continued.

> "I don't mind, I quite enjoy waiting to see what comes up", Melanie said.

> "Yes, I find it interesting, and I am curious", Gregg added.

> "Well I think it would be better if we knew what was happening next", Derek responded.

> "What would you like to happen next Derek?", Joe asked.

> "I don't know, I'm not the leader", Derek replied.

> "Well, if you were the leader what would you do?", Joe asked. After a moment's hesitation, Derek answered.

> "I think I would continue where we left off before dinner".

> "What – you mean the argument we were having?", David said, with a bitter edge to his voice.

"No , I didn't mean that", Derek hurried to say.

"Well I think it's a good idea", Bob responded quietly "I've been talking to Sid and we, I mean I, think there is a lot more to be said, and I want to clear the air".

"I agree with Bob", Sid added.

At this point I intervened, and said that it seemed we had two options so far. The first was to continue with the presentations, and the second was to deal with any outstanding issues about today's conflict, and I asked the group what they wanted to do.

"Well, I would prefer to avoid the conflict", Melanie said, "I hate people arguing".

"What was it about this particular argument that you didn't like?" I asked Melanie.

"It was the way that Bob seemed so aggressive. It frightened me", she replied.

"He seemed so quiet and then bang, he exploded."

"How does that make you feel, Bob?", I asked.

"Well, I didn't mean to frighten anyone..."

"OK", I interrupted, "but how did it make you feel when Melanie said that?".

"I was annoyed she thought I was aggressive, and upset that I frightened her", he answered.

"So you now have a conflict between being annoyed and upset", I responded. "Which would you prefer to be?"

"I would prefer to be annoyed – I don't like feeling upset."

"Does that mean you like being annoyed?", I asked. He thought for a moment and then said, "It seems to me I spend a lot of time being annoyed and angry, and it doesn't take much to set me off".

"So what would you like to do right now?", I asked him.

"I think I would like to explore the conflict some more to see what happened earlier on", he said.

I asked the group if they wanted to do what Bob suggested, and they agreed to continue.

"OK", I said, "then one way to start would be for each of us to say something about what happened earlier, what's happening now for us, and how we feel".

"I'd like to start", said Bob.

The next hour was spent discussing and exploring the earlier conflict and how this had affected people, and how they felt there were issues still to be answered. We brought those issues into the open and discussed them. The emphasis was on what people were feeling, rather than thinking. After an hour of animated discussion I intervened to ask the group if they would like to wind down for the evening. They said they did, so I asked if they would

welcome a suggestion from me. Needless to say, Derek was delighted.

"Then I suggest that we finish by each person in the group taking turns to go round and say one thing they appreciate about each person, including themselves."

There was some embarrassed laughter at this suggestion, but the group followed the suggestion and the whole atmosphere changed dramatically, with no sign of conflict or animosity left.

I believe that good facilitators use conflict to highlight and to work on the issues and problems that are generated. However, conflict has to be carefully used. There are a number of options for harnessing conflict, and these are described below.

Avoidance

There are many ways we can avoid conflict, from running away to ignoring or denying that it exists. Quick apologies and breaking off contact also work to avoid exploring the conflict. But of course, as Perls *et al.* say: "Avoiding conflict is avoiding the opportunity for the creation of something new"[5].

Acceptance

Knowing when conflict has arisen, and accepting it without doing anything about it also avoids the chance for discovery. "We shall have to agree to disagree" is one well-known way in which conflicts are accepted and not dealt with. Acceptance can also be a form of resignation: "OK, so there is a conflict, but I don't want to argue". The effect of such resignation is damaging to all involved; no one is satisfied.

> The opposite of the excitement of the conflict is the numbness of resignation[5].

Resolution

Resolving conflict can happen in two main ways. The first is flight, where one combatant leaves the battlefield to the victor, and the second is to fight, where battle takes place and one party is defeated. The conflict is resolved. One side has triumphed over the other, but is this really a resolution?" Perls *et al.* say:

> The peace of conquest, however, where the victim is still in existence and must be dominated, is, as peace, a negation: the suffering of the conflict has ceased but the figure of awareness is not alive with new possibilities, for nothing has been solved; victor and victim and their relations continue to fill the news. The victor is watchful, the victim resentful. In social wars we see that such negative peace is not stable, there are too many unfinished situations[5].

Completion

Completion occurs when all the people involved have explored how the conflict has arisen: how it has affected people; what they want to happen; what is happening; and how everyone involved can achieve a satisfactory

outcome. From this point it is possible to start to work together instead of in opposition to reach a new point of agreement. Of course, this form of completion rarely takes place, and conflicts result in both suffering and destruction.

To reach completion, facilitators have to try to do four things:

(1) be completely neutral and not to comment on the content of the conflict;

(2) to observe the process of the conflict and be fully aware of what is happening;

(3) not protect either party;

(4) to avoid offering suggestions about likely outcomes or paths to resolution;

The real creativity and growth comes from the completion of conflicts where those involved have searched for and discovered ways of reaching agreement. This form of personal development is very powerful, but I would like to recommend would-be facilitators not to generate conflict in the hope of creating such growth. To do this is not only manipulative but also dangerous, and will be very quickly recognized for what it is, which is interference in the group's process.

> Our job is to facilitate process and clarify conflicts. This skill depends less on formal education than on common sense and traditional wisdom[1].

Questions

> For that which is boundless in you abides in the mansion in the sky, whose door is the morning mist, and whose windows are the songs and silences of night[6].

Questions are the facilitator's keys to opening the doors and windows into what is going on for the group and the individual members of the group. For me, all contact with people is a process of asking and answering questions. In facilitation work with groups, and frequently on a one-to-one basis, I do not always answer questions. I do, however, ask a lot of questions.

Being aware of how questions can be used, and knowing ways in which the subject matter of the questions can be explored are essential features of good facilitation. But why are questions so important? I believe there are three reasons.

Involvement
First is the need for people to feel involved in what is happening, and an excellent way to do this is by asking questions which invite them to participate.

Interaction
People, especially when working in groups, like to be able to interact with other members of the group and the

facilitators. But not everyone feels able to interact freely and confidently. Facilitators can help them to overcome this initial hesitation by asking them questions and inviting them to ask questions.

Discovery
One of the principal ways we find out things is by asking questions. If we have never learned to ask questions effectively, and to use questions as a means of discovery, our learning and personal growth may still be significantly curtailed.

Anybody can ask a question, but having the skill to ask the right question at the right time is essential for the facilitator. This is by no means easy. I have discovered, from experience, nine different forms of questions that are asked in the course of effective facilitation. These are described below.

Open and closed questions can both be used for very specific purposes. Perhaps I should first remind you of the difference between "open" and "closed". An open question is one which invites people to explore what they want to say and to provide answers rich in description. For example, "What was it like for you when you were 15?". Open questions are questions of discovery. Closed questions allow only a limited response, which might offer a choice or no choice at all. For example, "Do you want to participate or not?", or "Do you have experience of leading groups?". Closed questions can usually be answered with a yes or no.

Questions, whether open or closed, need to be participant-centred and tuned in to the participant's reality rather than facilitator-centred and deriving from your curiosity or determination to be proved right[7]. All the following types of question can be open or closed, but the outcomes will be quite different depending on the form used. Some facilitators insist on only using open questions, but I find this a limiting attitude.

Discovery questions enable people to find things out. They are usually open questions which enable people answering to explore and be expansive. It also enables follow-up questions to be asked about the answer just given, and so the exploration can continue. Sometimes the question may contain a lead to the area of interest that the questioner wants to explore.

> It was late on Tuesday afternoon and we had just completed the presentations by the pairs, with the exception of the one from Michael and Sid. The group looked tired, but enthusiastic.
>
> "I imagine that at the moment you are tired, but keen to move on. Is this an accurate assessment?", I asked the group.
>
> "Well I'm certainly tired, and hungry, but we have over two hours before dinner, so I would like to do something else", Joe responded.

There seemed to be general agreement and so we agreed a 15-minute break before we continued.

When everybody was back I asked them where they would like to go next. I suggested we looked at the agenda list on the wall, which everyone did. Then Margaret spoke.

"Could I ask you a question Trevor?", she asked.

"Yes", I replied.

"Why do you ask so many questions?", she said with a smile. Several people laughed and Derek sat forward in his chair.

"Yes, I'd like to know that as well", he said.

I looked at Margaret and I smiled before I said, "Why do you think I ask so many questions?".

She laughed and said, "I knew that was coming, but I want you to tell me".

"OK, I will", I said, "but before I do are you willing to do an experiment?".

"Yes I think so", she said a little hesitantly.

"Oh it's nothing difficult or embarrassing", I assured her. "What I want to suggest is that we ask each other questions to find out what we want to know about each other. I ask a question which you answer, and then you ask me a question, and so on, OK?". She agreed, and for about ten minutes we followed this pattern. When we stopped I asked Margaret what had happened.

"I don't think I have ever learned as much about someone else or revealed so much about myself in such a short time", she said.

"And what was it like for you? How did you feel?", I asked.

"I enjoyed it very much. It was scary sometimes, daring to ask you personal things, and I was nervous about answering some of your questions", she replied.

"And did you notice anything happening about the kind of questions we were asking?", I asked.

"I think we were getting more daring and personal", she responded.

"And what was that like?", I asked.

"It was exciting", she replied.

"OK, so now you know one of the reasons I ask so many questions. Do you want to explore what the other reasons are?", I asked the group.

Although in the above example Margaret's initial question was a discovery question, I did not want simply to give her information, but to facilitate her own exploration and experience of the questioning process.

Clarification of what is happening in the group is a very important type of question. This might be very specific to check with someone what they said, and if the meaning I have inferred is what they intended. Or it could be more

general, such as, "What do you think is happening in the group right now?". The question is to have time and space for clarity to emerge rather than rushing on into the new waterfall of words.

Moving the group forward can be achieved more easily, and with more respect, by asking questions than by giving directions. This is one of those places where closed questions can be used to limit the choice, e.g. "Do you want to go on, or stop for lunch?". Alternatively, an open question can be used, such as, "What would you like to do next?". If the group is not ready to move on and you think they are, giving them the option to say no or to choose to stay in the same place is important. Both the examples I have used here do this.

Where to go next is different from a "moving question" because the desire to move forward is assumed, or has already been agreed. So in this case we want to know where to go. Once again it can be achieved with open or closed questions. If the group are unsure, I often ask them to sit quietly and ask themselves the question, "Where would I like to go next?", or "What would I like to do next?". When they have had time to reflect I ask them to write down their choice. I get someone to volunteer to collect the sheets of paper, to fold them up and to put them in a container of some kind. Then someone else chooses one of the papers. I then ask whose choice it was, and start by asking them why they chose that topic.

Avoiding contact can be done using questions to deflect people away from me, or to depersonalize what is happening. I do this when I use questions instead of making statements, e.g. "Would anyone like a comfort break?", when I mean to say, "I want a comfort break".

Asking questions instead of making statements is another way of keeping on the cool side of contactfullness. It is anti-commitment and deceptive, because one is implying, by the question, uncertainty and tentativeness. But the real message comes across because implications are read into the questions anyway[8].

Confronting can be done effectively with questions, which can be directed at the centre of the confrontation, either between members of the group, or members and facilitators. These questions are directed towards gaining a clear understanding of what is happening, and focusing attention on the confrontation rather than trying to sidestep it, or sweep it under the carpet.

Aiming the question is in the hierarchical (directive) mode, but the main intent of the question is co-operative: to prompt, encourage, and elicit; to invite the recipient to participate in uncovering learning[7].

Empowering questions are used to give the group confidence to do something which it is doubtful it can do.

In the above workshop example, when the group agreed to continue exploring the use of questions in facilitation the members asked me to tell them. This is what happened:

> "If you really want me to give you a lecture I will", I said, "but I believe you already know all about asking questions. For example, who knows what kind of question I am asking now?".

> "An enquiry", Melanie said.

> "To find something out", Greg added.

> "So what are the reasons I would ask questions when I am facilitating?", I asked.

> Everybody started to talk, so I asked for a volunteer. Michael agreed, and I asked him to facilitate the group so that I could participate. The group then went on with the task very efficiently.

Supportive questions are asked to provide the group, or individual members with the confidence to continue with what they are doing. Supportive questions are usually open (at least the ones I ask are), and they do not replace statements. Here is an example:

> The group continued to explore the use of questions in facilitation, and we seemed to have reached a point where we had run out of steam. We had created a series of flip charts with headings for reasons for using questions, and then on each sheet were examples of appropriate questions. Michael was looking pleased.

> "So what do you think of what we have done?", I asked the group.

> "I think it's a pretty good effort", Margaret said, "considering where we started about an hour ago".

> "Yes, I think we've done a good job", Greg said.

> "And me", chorused Melanie and Sid.

> "What do you think", Derek asked.

> "Does it matter what I think?", I asked him.

> "It does to me", he answered.

> "Then I think it is an excellent effort", I said. "Does that make you feel any better?".

> "No, not really. It confirms what I was thinking", he responded.

> "So how do you all feel about the way we did it?", I asked. This was followed by a short discussion about how much they had enjoyed discovering what they already knew and putting it into some semblance of order. Their awareness of their own abilities had increased and they were obviously pleased, and this sense of achievement continued for the rest of the evening.

Questions are very useful and powerful ways of facilitating when used at the right time and in the right way. Of course, questions can also lead us into trouble, or absolutely nowhere, so we have to use them with great care.

> "Supposing a tree fell down Pooh, when we were underneath it?"

> "Supposing it didn't", said Pooh after careful thought[9].

Releasing Potential

> You are led through your lifetime by the inner learning creature, the playful spiritual being that is your real self.

> Don't turn away from possible futures before you're certain you don't have anything to learn from them.

> You're always free to change your mind and choose a different future, or a different past[9].

We all have the inherent ability or capacity, not yet realized, for growth, development and coming into being. This potential is hidden, suppressed and limited by past conditioning. When we examine our self-image we tend to find that it has been formulated by the information we have been given by others about ourselves: the art teacher who continually tells us we will never be a painter; the parent who tells us every day that we are too soft and sensitive; the bully who is praised by his bully father; and so on.

We tend to create our own barriers and boundaries that reflect what we have listened to for so long, and we come to believe that they are true. When we are offered the freedom and support of a well-facilitated group we get glimpses of this constrained potential and want to explore further. The facilitator has to be quick to spot this and to help people to reach for their potential.

Given this freedom and opportunity, most people will move towards growth and self-enhancement. However, this process is one of considerable risk and endeavour. People choosing this journey have to turn their backs on a history of doubt and negativity.

> It would be grossly inaccurate to suppose that the organism operates smoothly in the direction of self-enhancement and growth. It would perhaps be more correct to say that the organism moves through struggle and pain towards enhancement and growth[10].

It is not surprising then that when people get a glimpse of their potential they often hesitate to go further. "No, I can't do that", or "I've never been able to do that", or "No, I don't have the hand-eye co-ordination to juggle". I often put a sign up at my workshops which says:

> If you can talk you can sing.
> If you can walk you can dance.
> Anyone can juggle and ride a
> unicycle including you.
> But you have to want to.

To assist people to release their potential, facilitators have to try to engender an environment which is safe (non-threatening), where people trust each other, where there is a common belief that what is to be attempted can be achieved, and where the effort is encouraged and supported. This also means a complete acceptance of mistakes and failed attempts that will inevitably lead to success. If people are not free to get it wrong then they will not attempt it, unless forced to try, which is not part of facilitation.

> I have learned throughout my life as a composer chiefly through my mistakes and pursuits of false assumptions not by my exposure to founts of wisdom and knowledge[11].

I believe that people can explore their potential by doing three things: The first is looking at *possibilities* rather than impossibilities. If you can look at anything that you want to do as possible, regardless of how you can do it, i.e. to separate the thought of it being possible from the action to make it possible, it does in reality become possible. Once we accept and believe something to be possible, then finding ways to make it happen becomes an option that never existed when we thought it to be impossible. This is the first and most vital step to reaching our potential.

> On Thursday evening after dinner, we decided to draw lots for who was to facilitate the evening session. I prepared some straws with one being shorter than the others. I thought it would be an interesting experiment to experience someone drawing the short straw. In the event it was Doreen. She was quite shocked.
>
> "I just couldn't possibly do it", she said breathlessly, "will someone else please do this evening?"
>
> "Well if you really don't want to, I..."
>
> "Just a moment", I interrupted Sid, "before someone takes over from Doreen, I would like to ask Doreen what is stopping you from facilitating the session?"
>
> "I haven't got any experience", she said.
>
> "And?", I asked.
>
> "And, I'm frightened of taking the responsibility".
>
> "And?", I asked again.
>
> "And I don't want to make a mess of it".
>
> "Do you think it could be possible for you to facilitate this evening?", I asked her.
>
> "I suppose so", she answered.
>
> "You don't sound convinced", I responded.
>
> "No, I'm not", she said.
>
> "Could you close your eyes and just picture yourself facilitating the evening really well?", I asked her.

> She closed her eyes and was quiet for a moment. Then she started to smile still with her eyes closed. "What's happening now?", I asked her.
>
> "It's going really well, and everyone is joining in".
>
> Then she opened her eyes and said, "But that's only in my mind. Maybe it won't go as well in practice".
>
> "So what's the very worst that could happen?", I asked her.
>
> "I could dry up and not know what to do next", she replied after a moment's thought.
>
> "And if that happened, what options would you have?", I asked.
>
> She thought for a moment and said laughing, "To hand over to you, or to ask someone to help, or to ask the group what they wanted to do".
>
> "OK", I said, "what do you want to do now?"
>
> "I think I'd like to have a go".
>
> "Would you like anyone to assist or support you?", I asked her.
>
> "Yes, Jennifer, if she's willing".
>
> "Of course I am", Jennifer said, without hesitation.
>
> "So why don't you start then?", I suggested.
>
> Doreen then proceeded to facilitate a very motivating and enjoyable evening on the "training spectrum", which we all agreed had been excellent. As we finished, I asked Doreen, "How do you feel now?".
>
> "Wonderful", she said, "I just didn't know I had it in me".

When we are unsure of ourselves it helps if we can reach out to an individual or the group to be with us. This is much harder to do than most of us ever admit. Asking for what we want from another person in a simple and direct way seems to have been knocked out of us in our childhood. Did you ever hear the expression, "Those who ask don't get?" And did you ever experience the result of not asking, which was that you didn't get anyway?

What follows on from this is a belief that we are undeserving, and so we hesitate from asking for what we want. So when we want help to take a step forward in our lives, we don't think anyone will respond, and worse, we don't even know how to ask.

Breaking through is the really difficult thing to do. When we set up a barrier to our own activities it is more difficult to break down than any other externally created barrier. We set it up in the first place as a form of protection. It is like the castle wall, safe inside, but also preventing us from exploring outside, like a prison we choose for ourselves that has an open door, yet we spend our time looking out of the barred window at the world we cannot enter.

The decision to break through our own barriers comes from within ourselves, from a belief that we can make it through to the other side. The facilitator is there to support us through this process, to encourage us to have a go, and to be there with us when we do it. Of course, in the "artificial" world of the workshop, breaking through is quite different from how it is in our "real" world, but it is a start, and it need not be a traumatic experience. It can be done through talking, singing, dancing, drawing, painting, or any other way that seems appropriate at that moment.

> On Friday morning we agreed to start a little later because of the party the night before which had started after Doreen's session and gone on for some time. But we were all there on time.
>
> "Before we start anything else, I want to say something", Sid said. "Last night after the party, I was talking to Greg and I realized that I have spent a long time working in training, and instead of having 30 years' experience I have one year's experience repeated 30 times. Well, maybe not quite, but it feels like that, and what I want to do before I leave this workshop is to do a session in a way that is completely different from what I would normally do."
>
> "What do you want from the group Sid?", I asked him.
>
> "Well, I would like the OK to facilitate the next session on leadership, and I would like Greg, Bob and Jennifer to help me."
>
> The group agreed to go along with Sid and the three people he asked agreed to help. Sid then asked his three helpers to join him in another room for a briefing. Meanwhile he asked the rest of the group to discuss in pairs what they liked and disliked about leaders. When they returned we divided into three groups. Sid joined one of the groups. Each group then discovered that it had a leader, or at least my group discovered it when Greg told us he was leading us, which he did very directively.
>
> After about 40 minutes we reassembled in the main group and each group had to present its solution to dealing with a problem. What we discovered was that one of the groups, mine, had a directive leader, another elected their own leader once they knew the problem, and the third group operated without a designated leader.
>
> We then went on to discuss what it was like being in our group and how it affected our ideas about what we liked and didn't like, and the effectiveness of the particular leadership approach. During all this, Sid stayed virtually silent, just making the occasional comment. Finally Sid asked for a volunteer to sum up the session, which Joe did.
>
> "So how was that for you?", I asked Sid.

> "It was the first time I have ever run, I mean facilitated, a session without leading from the front and by sharing responsibility for what we learned with the group."
>
> "And now that you have done it very successfully, how do you feel?", I asked.
>
> "Absolutely great! I feel pleased and excited and really good about myself", Sid said, with a lot of pleasure.

Releasing potential is possible if facilitators stay in touch with the group energy and the way that individuals interact within the group. But great care has to be taken to guide the process gently. It takes great courage, even in a safe and protective environment, to reach out, and/or break through to explore our potential. If we do not respect the feelings of the members of the group, and trust them to know when the time is right for them, we risk adding further layers of stone to the castle wall that they are safe behind.

> "Piglet", said Rabbit, taking out a pencil, and licking the end of it, "you haven't any pluck".
>
> "It is hard to be brave", said Piglet, sniffing slightly, "when you're only a Very Small Animal"[9].

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