

# Facilitation Skills for Interpersonal Transformation

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# Facilitation Skills for Interpersonal Transformation

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## 1. Introduction

The idea of „transformation“ implies that facilitators bring an agenda to situations of conflict. What is that agenda and how is it promoted? I believe the aim should be to use conflict as a moment, or more precisely, a series of moments of rich opportunity to contribute to human development. Facilitators, a term I use to refer to peacemakers working in group and inter-group settings, meet this agenda with responses that fall into two broad categories:

- by assisting empowerment, that is, supporting the persons involved in conflict to more fully achieve their own potential as human beings; and
- by fostering „right relationships“, that is, relationships characterized by recognition of the other, fairness, respect, mutuality and accountability.

In very simple terms, they encourage parties to pay attention to the needs of both the self and the other. As Baruch Bush and Folger (1994), I believe that transformation takes place when people are able both to empower the self and build right relationships with others.

## 2. Transformative Skills for Moment-by-Moment Interaction

What makes facilitator responses transformative? In exploring this question, I shall apply to commonly used facilitation skills the dual requirement of empowerment of self and recognition of the other.

In training workshops I repeatedly observe facilitators in training experiment with the challenge of getting to the negotiation table. How should they approach parties in conflict to draw them into a process of discussion with each other? Many facilitators begin their first contact with parties by outlining high-minded processes for peace and urging parties to enter them. Parties on the receiving end of these presentations often shock facilitators by responding with anger. „Don't come and try to tell us what to do!“ they bristle. When we debrief these role-plays later, parties point facilitators towards a simpler agenda: „Don't begin by trying to sell us on a process. Just tell us you are concerned about what is happening and that you want to understand our views on the situation.“

At stake in these conversations is a critical skill for facilitation: the ability to relate to others in empowering ways. Unless parties experience facilitators as empowering, they rarely give more than superficial access to their views, their networks, and decision-making processes. To ‚empower‘ here does not mean to ‚make powerful‘, rather it means:

- to strengthen people's sense of self;
- to increase their confidence that they are taken seriously by others as beings with a history, an identity worthy of respect and needs that must be addressed;
- to treat them in ways that honor and support their own resources for making decisions and pursuing solutions to their problems.

In order to empower parties in this way, facilitators need not agree with parties or approve of their actions. We need only make it clear through our eyes, body posture, and tone of voice that

we are eager to understand the situation as they understand it, that we will not reject them for their views, and that we recognise in them significant resources of their own for responding to the conflict at hand. Listening well is an important skill to communicate this understanding and attitude. Three particular listening skills are widely used by facilitators: paraphrasing, summarizing and reframing.

## 2.1 Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing, a form of intense listening, is demonstrated by the following conversation, the setting of which is a facilitated negotiation session between two colleagues in a community organization:

<b>Example 1: Paraphrasing</b>	
John:	She's impossible to work with in a group setting. She dominates conversations and she gets very upset if she doesn't get her way. I just don't feel that I can work with her any more!
Facilitator:	So you're very frustrated with her response in group discussions, and at this point you've given up on working with her.
John:	Look, I'm not saying I can't do anything with her. We can still do the community service work together, and I'm open to cooperating in the research project. But I can't work on the Executive Committee with her. I just can't stand the constant battles.
Facilitator:	You're prepared to work with her in most areas, but it's on the Executive Committee where you've become really discouraged about working together.
John:	Yes, I just don't think I can take it anymore.
Facilitator:	Um-hmm. Well, that gives us clarity about where you stand on this. Mary, let's hear from you. How do you see this?

Paraphrasing is a powerful tool in facilitation work for a number of reasons:

- it communicates understanding to others;
- a good paraphrase often brings further, more reflective responses from others, as in the example above – it moves the conversation to deeper levels;
- it slows down the conversation between the parties and creates a buffer between their statements;
- it can be used to 'launder' vicious or insulting statements so they are less inflammatory to the other party, if present, while retaining the essential points that were made.

Guidelines for paraphrasing include:

(i) to paraphrase is to repeat back in your own words what you understand someone else to be saying: this means keeping the focus of the paraphrase on the speaker and not on you, the listener.

For example, a facilitator can say:

- „You feel that...“
- „The way you see it is...“
- „If I understand you correctly, you're saying that...“

Do not say:

- „I know exactly how you feel. I've been in situations like that myself.“
- „You know, my sister had something like that happen to her a couple weeks ago. She...“

- (ii) a paraphrase should be shorter than the speaker's own statement.
  - (iii) a paraphrase mirrors the meaning of the speaker's words, but does not merely parrot or repeat the exact words of the speaker: for example, the speaker might say: „I resented it deeply when I found out that they had gone behind my back to the director. Why didn't they just come and talk with me, and give me a chance to sort things out with them?“ An effective paraphrase would be: „You were quite hurt that they didn't come directly to you to resolve things.“
  - (iv) a paraphrase does not judge or evaluate; it only describes empathetically. Use, for example, phrases such as:
    - „So your understanding is that...“
    - „The way you see it then...“
    - „You were very unhappy when he...“
    - „So when he walked out of the meeting you thought he was merely trying to manipulate you.“
    - „If I understand you correctly, your perspective is that...“
- Don't say:
- „That doesn't sound like a very constructive attitude to me.“
- (v) a small percentage of people seem to prefer not to be paraphrased: observe carefully the reaction of those you are paraphrasing and adjust your use accordingly.

## 2.2 Summarising

Paraphrasing is a moment-by-moment skill that restates what the listener has just understood an individual to say. A summary is similar to a paraphrase, but it condenses the content of several comments that may have been made over the course of many minutes. Facilitators can use it to review all the key points that have been made by one party about their views, thus communicating the sense that they understand the entire situation being presented by that person. Facilitators can also summarise comments of all speakers every few minutes as a way of keeping the discussion focused.

### Example 2: Summarising

In a discussion between police and community representatives about difficult relationships, a facilitator made the following summary of issues: „It seems that several concerns are being raised here regarding police and community relations. The community representatives are saying that they feel that police protection is completely inadequate and that the attitude of police towards community members is not constructive. The police say that they have substantially increased the number of patrols in the community and are trying hard to improve their relationships with the community, but they feel that they lack the support of community leaders needed to earn the trust of community members.“ The facilitator watched the faces of the parties carefully as she spoke to make sure that people felt comfortable with her summary. Observing several nods of approval, she proceeded. „It sounds as if one of the things that both sides agree on is that there is a need for improved relationships between the police and the community,“ she said. When heads nodded again, she continued, „Would you find it useful to talk about this and get some ideas from both groups about what could be done to address this problem?“ In this way the facilitator used summary to focus the group's attention on a particular issue, and moved skilfully from her summary to invite the group to offer ideas for resolving the problem.

### 2.3 Listening for and Summarising Commonalities

In fact, the facilitator above accomplished more than summarising in her final moves. She heard and highlighted areas of commonality, a skill that can be particularly transformative in its impact. In the above example, the commonality lay in agreeing on a common problem. In other situations, the commonalities may be small concessions that are mentioned in the midst of a heated argument. Facilitators should be alert for these and retrieve them as a way of improving the atmosphere.

#### Example 3: Commonalities

Two organisations, A and B, providing similar services to a community had been experiencing conflict between their staff members in the field. In a facilitation session members of each organisation had made accusations, including the charge that the other was spreading rumours in the community. The following exchange then took place:

Director of A: The only way we're going to prevent this kind of thing from taking place is if field workers of the two organizations meet on a regular basis and try to co-ordinate activities between them.

Director of B: Well, that's been a problem from the very beginning. I agree with you there, but as I was saying earlier, unless you and your senior staff make a shift in attitude, we'll never solve this problem.

Facilitator: It seems that both organisations came to this meeting today because you want to try and solve this problem. From what you have both just said, it sounds like you agree that it would be a good idea to establish a regular forum for field workers from the two organisations to meet and coordinate their work. What would it take to make something like that successful?

Had the facilitator not become involved in this way, a significant point of consensus probably would have passed unnoticed, because the director of Organisation B was shifting the discussion back towards previous criticisms he had made about the management of Organisation A. Fortunately, the facilitator was alert and utilised this point of agreement well. Half an hour later, after the directors had finished working out the details for a monthly meeting of field workers from both organisations, the atmosphere had improved, and it was easier to tackle the more complicated issues separating the organisations.

### 2.4 Reframing Conflict

A critical question is how parties understand or frame the conflict, the other party, and the issues separating them. If, for example, one or both parties understand opponents as unprincipled killers determined to destroy them, they will frame the conflict as a battle for survival requiring warlike responses. If they view the conflict as a battle for disputed land, they will haggle over every square centimetre of territory. If the parties frame the conflict differently, the possibilities for fresh and cooperative responses increase. Thus, facilitators commonly seek to reframe the conflict in ways that assist a resolution.

#### **Example 4: Reframing Conflict**

A facilitator might seek to help the parties recognise that, in fact, the violence is the tragic result of a complex but understandable struggle to maintain cultural traditions and a sense of identity by two groups occupying the same region. Thus the facilitator might say:

*„It appears that a great many people have died on both sides because they believed the future of their own communities was at stake in this struggle. It would be useful to hear from each side your aspirations and concerns for the future of your own people.“*

Also in the previous illustration about organisational conflict the facilitator listened carefully to comments by the opposing sides, and reframed part of the discussion in terms of a specific goal shared by both parties.

In both examples, it should be apparent that reframing does not mean a facilitator instructs the parties as to what the real issues are. Rather, the facilitator works with things identified by the parties, and asks questions that direct their attention to dimensions not previously noticed or explored. By inviting a fresh look at the needs or goals of all parties, their underlying interests and intentions, reframing seeks to assist parties in seeing problems in perspectives that suggest new possibilities for joint resolution.

### **2.5 What Makes Facilitator Responses Transformative?**

The skills described above are ordinary communication skills that are not normally described as transformative. When and how do they become transformative? Applying the definition of transformation introduced at the beginning of this chapter, they are transformative to the extent that they both empower the respective parties and encourage them to build right relationships with others. Hence, although good listening skills are an important tool in empowering the parties, they become fully transformative only to the extent that they assist both in empowerment and relationship-building. Listening well to each party in separate sessions takes a step towards transformation because it is empowering. It develops its full transformative potential when each party is also assisted in hearing and taking seriously the perspectives of the other party. This might be accomplished, for example, by listening to both in joint sessions, or by thoughtfully presenting the concerns of the other party to each side. The technique of pointing out commonalities can be understood as particularly transformative because in one move it simultaneously empowers each side (by hearing and taking seriously its concerns) and strengthens the relationship (by pointing out linkages, common problems, or common goals). Reframing seeks to cast the perceptions of each side in a way that also takes into account the perceptions and needs of the other side as well.

The aim of this section was not to illustrate the full repertoire of responses available to facilitators (see further reading). Rather, it was to propose a simple theoretical framework for assessing the many tools available. By defining key components of transformation, we can more easily recognise what is required and which of the many tools we should choose to achieve transformation.

### 3. Transformative Techniques for Sustained Dialogue

So far we have considered individual interaction skills that facilitators often use throughout their conversations with individuals in group conflicts. However, facilitators need more than this. We also need a repertoire of tools to assist numerous people in conversations and negotiation in group settings. This section describes several techniques I have found particularly effective for these purposes, drawing on the concept of transformation to explain why these techniques are effective in enabling transformative dialogue.

#### 3.1 Samoan Circle

Perhaps my favourite technique for group work involving large numbers of people in the same room is the „Samoan Circle“. Essentially an „open fishbowl“ with an added rule of no communication except among those sitting in the fishbowl, it is effective in enabling a large number of people to discuss a controversial issue without unleashing severe polarisation.

##### Technique 1: Samoan Circle

One or two representatives for each of the views present constitute the core of the Samoan Circle. Surrounded by 2-4 „open chairs“, they sit in a semi-circle for the entire discussion. The representatives discuss the issues with each other as the larger group listens. Before they begin the discussion the facilitator announces the rules. Anyone from the larger group who wishes to join the conversation may do so by coming forward at any time and taking one of the open chairs on either end of the semicircle. If all chairs are filled, those who come forward may stand behind an open chair until it becomes available. All are welcome to participate, but there is one ground rule: No communication is allowed except within the semi-circle; no talking, booing, hissing, or clapping except for those in the semi-circle. The facilitator secures agreement to observe this ground rule from the group, via the raising of hands or nodding of heads. The discussion then begins with a brief statement by each representative in the semi-circle and proceeds as a conversation among the representatives, with others joining whenever they wish. The facilitator may withdraw and watch as a silent observer or sit in the circle and actively facilitate the conversation using techniques like those described in the preceding section.

As a rule the situation most hazardous to constructive group talk is one with large numbers of people shouting opinions from all corners of a room. Speakers in such circumstances will rise, lob inflammatory insults at others, and then sit down, withdrawing into a sea of anonymity and safety among their fellow supporters. Rhetoric and anger often escalate rapidly in such settings. The Samoan Circle blocks these dynamics. Each speaker must come forward and sit in a place of engagement that is guided by the facilitator. If provocative statements are made, the facilitator can follow up with techniques that defuse them, asking clarifying questions, using paraphrasing skills, drawing out underlying concerns, and so on. Whereas unfettered group discussion seems to bring out the worst in speakers, the Samoan Circle seems to bring out the best.

Reflecting now on this technique that I found effective long before I sought to view it from a transformative perspective, I recognise that it contains strong elements of both requirements.

Empowerment is a central component, not only for each group represented, but also for each individual present. All groups are encouraged to fully express their respective views through their representatives, while individuals can also express their personal views by joining the semicircle. Furthermore, recognition of the other, and the relationship-building that comes with it, are also central to the Samoan Circle. Because this method tends to bring out the best in participants, the quality of engagement is usually high; participants often seem to hear each other in new ways and thus gain important new insights about their opponents' views.

However, even when new insights are few, a deeper form of recognition and relationship-building takes place implicitly. Participating in a structured engagement such as this is, in effect, participating in a joint ritual, a social engagement governed by a commonly accepted set of procedures with multiple layers of meaning. The procedures are minimal, of course, and the layers of meaning may be superficial and short-lived. But the result is potentially transformative: for a set period of time opponents engage each other face to face on shared terrain, jointly created by their choice to restrain their most destructive impulses and communicate with each other.

### 3.2 Conflict Spectrum

The conflict spectrum is a tool for initially opening the discussion in organisational or community conflicts. It gives people a chance to get a sense of where others stand on the issues, and enables participants to gather information about other views and how many people hold them. Because it requires every individual to openly indicate their views, it should only be used where there is sufficient safety for people to let their opinions be known.

#### Technique 2: Conflict Spectrum

Identify one end of the room for people strongly convinced about one view, the other end for those strongly convinced of the opposite. Point out that there are an infinite variety of additional places between these two locations. Ask everyone to take a position somewhere on this spectrum. Then invite individuals to briefly state why they have chosen the spot on which they stand. This can (but need not) be taken a step further by dividing the spectrum into three groups – the two ends plus a middle group, if there is one. Give each group twenty minutes to prepare a list of strengths and weaknesses of their position and then report the list to the entire group. You can go yet another step further by then inviting people to place themselves on the spectrum again; if anyone now chooses a new location, invite them to explain why.

Even people who in previous discussions have spoken in aggressive and insulting ways are often able to speak in constructive tones to one another when positioned within a conflict spectrum. Explaining „why I am standing on this spot within the spectrum“, individuals seem to express themselves more positively than when they explain „why my opponent is wrong“.

From the perspective of transformation, both empowerment and recognition of the other are strongly present here: the spectrum empowers by offering physical space as an aid to speakers, giving them a concrete, spatial frame of reference within which to locate themselves. It also creates an implicit sense of connection to the other: even those who stand at the opposite end of the spectrum stand in a continuum with the self. Also, like the Samoan Circle, cooperation with one's opponent in a joint activity dedicated to elucidating the views of all in a positive and constructive way, creates a temporary ritual of common purpose.



### 3.3 Interviews

Interviewing people in the presence of their opponents is another simple tool that can have transformative impact in settings of group conflict. The tone should be that of a friendly, informal conversation with an attentive facilitator using a lot of paraphrasing.

#### Technique 3: Interviews

Establishing a personal connection to each speaker at the beginning of the interview is important. Sometimes it is good to begin on a personal note:

- „Tell me a little about yourself“ for someone new to the facilitator.
- „How’s your family?“
- „What do you like about this community?“
- „What’s new in your life?“ for those with whom the facilitator is already acquainted.

Then move to the issues at hand:

- „How do you personally view these issues?“
- „Tell me what’s been happening here from your own perspective.“
- „What are your major concerns here?“ The key to productive interviews is the interviewer’s ability to draw out speakers beyond their inclination to merely state biases or make simplistic analyses. That is, the facilitator must follow up statements by the interviewee with responses such as:
  - „Explain that a little further...“
  - „Help me understand why that was so upsetting for you...“
  - „Tell me what your thoughts and feelings were as this was happening...“
  - „Give me some background to understand why this event means so much to you...“

The interview as a facilitation tool creates an atmosphere of deep engagement without the tension that often accompanies direct exchanges between the parties. If supported with the listening skills described above, an interview nurtures trust between the facilitator and the parties, and enables parties to express nuances they rarely voice in antagonistic exchanges. Instead of a hostile opponent, those interviewed face a supportive facilitator who actively seeks to draw them out, thereby empowering them.

The interview can be used in separate sessions with the parties to lay the foundation for an engagement with other parties later. It can also be used with the Samoan Circle as a way of assisting each speaker to go deeper, or in the context of ongoing negotiations to gain insights into the perspectives of those involved in an impasse. Only when conducted in joint sessions with opposing parties does the interview become immediately transformative, for here it simultaneously fosters both empowerment of the self and recognition of the other. The support of a skilled facilitator empowers parties to express themselves with a coherency and depth not achieved when they merely restate old demands to opponents. Furthermore, addressing a supportive listener reduces bombast so that opponents are sometimes more able to truly hear and recognise the needs of the other than in direct exchanges.

### 3.4 Interviews with Listening Chair

Adding a „listening chair“ to interviews can have a powerful impact.

#### Technique 4: Listening Chair

Each person to be interviewed is invited to pick someone from the group (preferably someone with different views) to be his „listener“, who then comes forward and sits in a designated listener’s chair. The facilitator asks questions, the interviewee responds, and the listener paraphrases everything that the interviewee says. This requires the speaker to pause every few minutes to give the listener a chance to paraphrase. The facilitator may need to demonstrate this by serving as the listener for the first round.

This technique requires selective usage. At first it may seem clumsy and artificial, and it demands a lot of the listener. It works only when trust is high between the facilitator and the parties, when the parties are deeply motivated to address their differences, and when the individuals involved have the flexibility to engage opponents in ways they have never experienced before. However, in the occasional circumstances when all these criteria are met, the listening chair is more powerful than any other technique I know for transforming the quality of interaction between parties. This is so because it incorporates an intensive form of empowerment – supportive interviewing – with an intensive form of recognition – paraphrasing of an opponent.

## 4. Transformative Process Design

We have examined two categories of facilitation skills: micro skills for moment-by-moment interaction and tools for facilitating an in-depth conversation over a period of many minutes. Facilitation would be relatively easy if it were merely a matter of employing these skills to aid parties in conflict to communicate. Unfortunately, things are not that simple. Group conflicts take place in a context of larger forces and patterns. These usually contribute to the conflict arising in the first place and they impact powerfully on the possibilities of its transformation.

#### Example 5: Personal Gestures and Structural Transformation

At a South African conference of church delegates in 1992, a white professor of theology publicly apologised for his role in the white system of apartheid. I thought the apology was sincere and expected that the many black participants in the conference would welcome it. Instead they were angry. „They’ve taken everything from us“, said a community leader in discussions later. „Now they think that all they need to do is say they’re sorry, and we’ll say ‚you’re forgiven‘ and then they can go their merry way, released of all obligations.“ Another said, „I don’t want nice apologies so white people can feel good. What I want is for whites to join us in the struggle to dismantle apartheid and create justice.“ The black delegates recognised that the healing of this conflict required more than transformative gestures between individuals; and they were certainly not about to participate in what they saw as an effort to limit attention to these micro-exchanges.

One cannot separate personal transformation from structural transformation, nor can we rely on skilfully facilitated dialogue alone to accomplish transformation. The final section of this article proposes the concept of process design as one useful tool in extending the concept of transformation to the larger issues at stake in many conflicts.

#### 4.1 Decision-making as a Key Focus in Facilitation

An inescapable reality of group conflict is the competition for power and resources. How can facilitators work towards transformation in the face of these realities? To answer, we must recognise that, to a substantial extent, facilitation in group conflicts involves decision-making: that is, assisting parties to make decisions about the allocation of power and resources.

Of course, other crucial dynamics, such as the need for identity, are also at stake in these conflicts. But it is decision-making that requires answers to key questions of process and thus provides opportunity for influence on matters of long-lasting importance. Who makes decisions, i.e., who is involved and in what ways? What mechanisms are used for deciding? What information and criteria are considered? Few parties devote conscious attention to these questions; they just do it, unthinkingly, in the way they learned from predecessors and role models. Part of the task of transformative facilitators is to make these choices explicit: by enabling parties to recognise the necessary choices and their implications, facilitators increase the likelihood that parties will select decision-making processes that foster human development.

People in conflict quarrel about issues, such as land, access to resources, and power. On the surface, facilitators' work appears to be assisting parties in discussing these issues and finding solutions. But the most important contribution lies at a deeper level. The way in which people go about discussing these issues – the process – has far-reaching implications for the parties, for their long-term relationships, and the structures of society around them. As facilitators, we should aim at a transformative impact in conflict by actively and openly seeking to influence the process in which parties in conflict engage each other in decision-making. We are impartial in our commitment to the well-being of all, but this does not mean we are 'neutral'. Commitment to human development calls us to consciously advocate processes that empower participants and foster right relationships.

#### 4.2 The Concept of Process Design

To thus support human development requires a finely developed sense of process design. This begins with understanding that there is a difference between process and content, between how and what. In particular, process design recognises that often there is more at stake in how a decision is reached than in what that decision is: i.e., people are usually more sensitive to the process than to the actual content of a decision. Consider an everyday example:

##### **Example 6: Differing Process Design**

It is time for a coffee break at a meeting of professional colleagues. The chair suggests a thirty-minute break, calls out the names of three women, and asks them to go and set up the refreshments.

The selected women are all from the same racial group, a minority in the community

and the professional group. During the break, others from this ethnic group gather in a corner and angrily discuss the double burden of sexism and racism. After the break, they confront the chair and the entire group with their outrage.

In another organisation, it is also time for a coffee break. Here, too, the leader announces the names of three minority women chosen to serve tea. However, here the women laugh good-naturedly as they rise to undertake their duties. Why? Their names were chosen randomly by pulling straws.

The content was the same in both groups: individuals were chosen to prepare refreshments against their preferences. In the second group, however, the content was accepted because the process was fair.

Why are people so sensitive to process? Why do they often care more about the way in which a decision is made than about the actual content of the decision? Intuitively, people sense that process makes profound statements about human worth, about who counts. As long as they perceive the process as fair and respectful, most people can accept considerable disappointment and frustration about not attaining their desired outcomes – be they political, financial, organisational, or technical. But those same people will often rise up in bitter, defiant outrage if they feel that the way in which decisions were reached was unfair or demeaning.

#### **Example 7: Bad Process**

„They act as though we don't even exist!“ muttered an outraged community leader after city officials announced plans to sell several acres of an abandoned educational institution to developers, without consulting local residents. This leader may not have reflected explicitly that assessments of human worth are implicit in the way all decisions are made. However, like most people, he was exquisitely sensitive to bad process when it was used on him. He saw that more was at stake than a mere decision about land use. He saw that failure to consult with local residents about a decision that would permanently alter the character of their neighbourhood represented a fundamental attack on the ability of residents to have a voice in their own future. Along with dozens of other outraged neighbours, he mounted a campaign that unseated an entire group of officials in the next election.

A great deal of group conflict is simply the consequence of bad process, for people commonly reject even the best ideas and proposals, if they result from processes that they find objectionable. Even thoughtful and well-intentioned leaders in non-governmental organisations, faith communities, schools and universities, governmental and public institutions regularly violate principles of good process design and are baffled by the reactions of those around them. Focused on outcomes that are often laudable, these leaders do not realise the damage they inflict on relationships when they use processes that imply that others do not deserve to be consulted or involved in decision-making. Often they find it difficult to understand why process is so important or to recognise the difference between good and bad process.

Most people find it easier to identify bad process than good process. For many years we have asked people in workshops to tell stories of times when they were on the receiving end of bad process: „Tell us about an instance when you were upset, not so much about a decision, but about the way in which a decision was made. Explain why you were upset.“ Stories pour forth in response

to this invitation. As groups reflect on bad experiences, principles for good decision-making processes emerge that carry important insights for responding transformatively to group conflicts. Facilitators can use these principles to guide their work with conflicted parties.

### 4.3 Principles of Good Process Design

(i) Good process begins by asking, „who should be involved?“ not „what are we going to do?“ The answer communicates much about „who counts“. Beginning with „what are we going to do?“ overlooks the extremely sensitive „who“ question about participation, and alienates people whose support is essential to long-term success. A commitment to the transformative value of empowerment suggests that the first step in decision-making is to determine who will be affected so as to involve them appropriately. Questions to guide this assessment include:

- Who will view themselves as deeply affected by this negotiation, project, or decision? (Usually this group should be at the heart of the decision-making process).
- Who is in a position to block implementation if they are unhappy with decisions? (These parties should always be consulted and often need to take an active part in the decision-making process).
- Whose advice or assistance will be valuable? (This question calls for broad consultation).
- Whose approval will be required to enable this project to proceed?
- What are the interests, concerns, or motivations of each of the above groups?

(ii) Good process is conducted under auspices acceptable to all. Parties tend to link sponsorship with whoever announces an event or invites people to participate in it, who finances it, who facilitates, who gets credit if the event is successful. When mistrust is high, it is imperative that all perceive sponsorship as impartial, for parties recognise that power and influence accrue to sponsors. Impartiality can either be achieved by securing truly impartial sponsor(s) or by using several less-than-partial sponsors who in their totality are seen as impartial.

Co-sponsorship is a further example for good process design. Take, for example, a community that is complaining about police brutality. Here, a forum for dialogue between police and community is unlikely to earn community trust, if it is sponsored solely by the police. Good process design would call for such a forum to be sponsored by an independent organisation or jointly by the police and a trusted community organisation.

(iii) good process involves essential parties or their representatives, not only in negotiation and decision-making, but also in the design of the process itself: it is important to consult with key parties early in planning a decision-making or negotiation process, while process plans are still tentative and flexible. Often the opposite happens: a small group of well-intentioned people plans a negotiation or decision-making process and then goes to the parties and tries to sell it to them, soliciting their participation. This approach makes it difficult to recover from even small mistakes in strategy planning and fails in the transformative goal of empowering the parties.

To earn trust and participation of primary parties, facilitators should consult with them in the early stages of planning peace efforts, so they feel that they have helped design the negotiation forum. Facilitators can approach the parties in this manner: „We are wondering about creating a forum in which people can talk. Would you be interested? What should it look like? Who should be there? When and where should we meet? Who should convene it? Should it be on the record or off the record?“ Transformative facilitators do not build and then try to sell a process to the parties. Rather, they create one with them in tentative, low-key private discussions before announcing plans to talk. One useful way to do this is to create a Process Committee. Composed of thoughtful people from all key parties, this group has the task of planning, announcing, and coordinating the process

of negotiation or decision-making.

(iv) good process is clear about purpose and expectations of each step: a common cause of conflict is confusion about pivotal events, as example 8 illustrate:

**Example 8: Three Cases of Unclear Processes**

1. A government agency appoints a committee to study the location of proposed new housing in an area of inter-group tension. The committee makes recommendations, which the government agency then chooses to ignore. The community is polarised by this response. The director of the agency, however, says that the committee was purely advisory and that he never promised to accept its findings.
2. A vote is held in a community organisation. Afterwards, a number of people say that they didn't attend that meeting because they thought the session was merely to exchange views. The vote, they thought, would be held a month later during annual business meeting. This group agitates for a re-vote; others dismiss them as troublemakers.
3. A newly formed committee agrees to put a critical issue to 'majority vote'. Sixty percent vote „yes“; these members claim they clearly won. Others say the measure lost in voting, insisting that 67% is required for a majority. Both sides accuse the other of trying to manipulate the rules and the results.

Much misunderstanding can be avoided if each step in the decision-making process is worked out in advance. As much of the overall process as possible should be mapped out early in planning. Parties should share common information on

- the purpose of the process and of each event within it;
- what will happen and when (a timeline is helpful here);
- who will make the final decision; and
- what decision-rule applies (i.e., 51% majority, 67% majority, consensus, etc.).

These matters cannot usually all be decided at the very beginning for every step of the process, but they should be clarified as early as possible. Moreover, they should be decided in close consultation with the persons most deeply involved in the process (see above), and communicated clearly to all. If a Process Committee is used as suggested, the first task of such a committee could be to develop a written proposal with recommendations for these issues.

(v) good process offers more than one kind of forum to consider options and express opinions, so as to ensure that all can contribute in a forum in which they feel comfortable: in institutional settings, use a mix of large group discussion, small group discussion, polls or questionnaires, study circles and personal interviews. In community or political settings, in addition to the above, use conferences, community forums, publications, and study materials.

(vi) good process provides report-backs to those participating or affected: during the negotiation or discussion process, use open discussions, surveys, non-binding votes, questionnaires, interim reports, and so forth, to keep people informed about the trend of the discussion before the decision is final. If people are shocked at the outcome of a decision-making process, it is usually a sign that designers of that process failed to build adequate interim report-back mechanisms into the process. Disappointment is normal in decision-making and need not be a cause for worry. Shocked surprise is a different matter. Often it brings charges of an unfair process and reduces acceptance

of outcomes.

Report-backs should:

- provide summaries of ideas, opinions, suggestions, etc., gathered thus far in the process in interviews, meetings, and written submissions: gathering such data about people's views without reporting it back often leads to charges of manipulation;
- communicate decisions made by sub-groups;
- give frequent opportunities for people to comment on how they feel about the process: i.e., whether it is fair, whether they understand the next steps, and so forth.

(vii) good process cannot happen without careful thought, consultation, and planning: haste is a major enemy of good process, and usually leads to great waste of time and energy in the end.

#### 4.4 The Link between Process Design and Transformation

No matter how caring the exchange between individuals, there is little possibility for transformation if the institutions to which those individuals are connected, or the customs and structures governing their interaction, continue to inflict injuries. Therefore, facilitators should pay close attention to matters of power and structure. However, we must be careful not to lose the parties' trust by taking sides or advocating our own solutions.

But this does not mean relinquishing all values. The principles of good process described above clearly reflect transformative values. In a variety of ways they point towards strategies that empower those affected by conflict: by involving them in planning and decision-making; by soliciting and respecting their concerns in ways that are suitable to them and by providing them with full information. These principles also point towards helping parties interact in ways that foster recognition of the needs and perceptions of others: planners are encouraged to consult widely with various parties, and this in itself often causes parties to take opponents more seriously; parties are encouraged to work together in planning decision-making processes; discussion forums are created that enable participants to hear opposing perceptions; information about the trend of thinking is reported back not only at the end of decision-making, but during the course of discussion.

To the extent that principles of good process are followed in designing interaction between the parties, I believe that possibilities of structural transformation are considerably enhanced. Clearly, F.W. de Klerk would not have accepted this assertion in 1989 when he released Nelson Mandela from prison, for the signs are many that de Klerk thought he could negotiate minor concessions and retain the fundamentally unjust system of apartheid. However, de Klerk underestimated the ultimately liberating power of negotiation processes that reflect principles of good process design. Too late to turn back, he realised that he could not control the forces he had unleashed. South Africa today remains, of course, far from transformed, but there is no denying that it has taken a big step forward on a journey that will require many more.

## 5. Summary

The possibility of transformation at personal and interpersonal levels in group conflicts requires facilitators to work in transformative ways with multiple approaches. We must use transformative communication skills in our moment-by-moment interaction with individuals. We must draw on a repertoire of methods for engaging individuals in transformative dialogue with each other. We must also assist parties in designing overall processes of negotiation and decision-making

that bring transformative influences to bear on the structural dimensions of their relationship. The twin concepts of empowerment and fostering right relationships can be applied within all three categories in guiding our choice of facilitation tools and strategies.

## 6. Reference and Further Reading

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- Rothman, Jay 1982. *From Cooperation to Confrontation: Resolving Ethnic and Regional Conflict*, London, New Delhi, and Newbury Park, Ca.: Sage Publications.

## 7. Web Resources

Group Facilitation Listserv. Any seeking to do conflict transformation in group settings needs excellent group facilitation skills. This is a free email listserv on the general topic of group facilitation with participants from dozens of countries (albeit dominated by people in the North) and sure to inspire anyone interested in group facilitation. To subscribe, send a message to this address: [LISTSERV@ALBANY.EDU](mailto:LISTSERV@ALBANY.EDU) (You may leave the SUBJECT field blank.) In the body of the message type: SUBSCRIBE GRP-FACL Your Real Name

- Steve Vincent, Southampton. England: essay on „Empathic Understanding“,



at <http://users.powernet.co.uk/bapca/Training/Empathy.htm>

- Jere Moorman/Center for Studies of the Person. California. USA: essay on „The Person Centered Approach to Conflict Transformation“, at <http://users.powernet.co.uk/pctmk/papers/conflict.htm>
- Several essays on the concept of conflict transformation can be found at <http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/transform/tmall.htm>