
FACILITATING COMPLEX GROUP DYNAMICS WITH CONFIDENCE

By Myriam Laberge, Breakthroughs UNLIMITED Inc.

How Bad Can It Get?

As my partner and I were setting up the night before a big multi-stakeholder session of elected officials, the three Administrators who had hired us to facilitate a Strategic Planning session for a rural regional district walked into the session room to give us a heads up.

“Last night at the Board meeting of the district, the Mayors of a couple of the member municipalities had a row, called each other names, and nearly came to fisticuffs.” They added, *“if the meeting doesn’t go beyond noon tomorrow,”* (it was scheduled to go for 1.5 days) *“we want you to know that we’ll still pay you”*. Yikes! What would you do?

The Value of A Solid Pro-Active Design

While the severity of the conflict and group dynamic were much worse than we’d anticipated, we had come prepared. *(Years of experience had taught us that 98% of all potential group problems simply don’t happen when time is taken for careful design and planning.)* We assured our client that we were confident our meeting design would be sturdy enough to help the group navigate the choppy waters of conflict and tension and lead to both the creative outcomes and consensus agreements they were looking for. Before they left us to finish our set-up, we checked one more time with the Administrators to ensure that the seating plan would keep the conflicted personalities apart, at least at the beginning of the session.

As we started the next morning, we began the session with as much clarity as

possible about the purpose, desired outcomes, goals, agenda, session ground rules, and roles. We then obtained agreement from everyone before actually beginning, whether they would be willing to work together for 1.5 days towards these goals and in accordance with these rules. We also asked everyone to be responsible for managing his or her own small group discussion process, thereby enhancing the level of self-responsibility for ensuring the meeting would be productive and effective.

Once these agreements were in place, we used a process of Appreciative Inquiry, to help participants tap their deepest aspirations as elected officials serving their constituents, and to remember the times in their regional districts when they had functioned at their best. This exercise established a foundation of positive energy and helped balance the experience from the Board meeting where they were arguably at their worst.

From there on, members were asked, in three different small groups, to create and analyze a graphic history timeline of the decisions around key service areas that the regional district was responsible for, and the lessons learned that were leading to conflicts and tensions today. This allowed participants to ‘focus together’ on a common issue objectively, without blame, and to inquire together, looking for root causes to the deeper reasons for the challenges they were grappling with in the present situation.

The session went on from there, gradually allowing participants to sit with others with whom they had been conflicted, keeping to the ground rules of respect, looking for common ground, being ‘tough on issues but soft on people’.

At the end of that session, the two conflicted Mayors were seated at the same table and expressed respect for each other’s opinions. The Chair, who was one of the warring Mayors went on to say, *“I am very glad that, in this session, we were able to set aside our personal differences, focus on the needs of our citizens, and come up with solutions that will benefit them and our municipalities in the future. This is the reason that I chose public office, and I am proud of the work that we accomplished together in this session as a Board.”*

Taking Ongoing Pulse Scans for Dysfunction During a Meeting

No matter how prepared you are, as a facilitator, you are fully ‘on’ from the moment participants walk into the door, scanning for information that will help you to understand their needs, state, demeanour, and any signs of current or emerging dysfunction or conflict. Verbal

and especially non-verbal body language are important cues to watch for throughout a session (*folded arms, eye-rolling, toes pointed towards the door, not coming back from the breaks*).

Timely and Appropriate Interventions

If your scan reveals either some dysfunctional individual behaviours or group dynamics, your role as a facilitator is to be assertive and take a timely and appropriate intervention. Only rarely is it okay to do nothing (e.g., letting a few jokes go by to ease tension and have some fun). In all other instances, your job is to stay neutral, stay calm, stay objective, and take action. The form of that action will depend on the behaviour or dynamic. Most often the best intervention is to state what you are noticing in neutral terms, ask the group why/what is going on, invite the group to check back to its original agreements (agenda, ground rules, roles, process), and what it would like to do about it, or alternatively, you can propose a solution and check out what the group thinks about it.

About the Author:

Myriam Laberge (M.A.) IAF Certified Professional Facilitator is a highly experienced facilitator with two decades designing, facilitating, consulting on, instructing, and writing about effective, proven, co-creative facilitation and change processes. Qualified and experienced in a wide range of facilitation methods and processes, Myriam is able to blend, develop, and deliver customized designs to achieve the targeted results desired by client organizations and communities. She is known for her ability to help groups tap their extraordinary creativity and power, through appropriate design, deeply compelling questions, respectful interactions, and effective processes. As an Associate Director at the Collaboration and Innovation Group, *Centre for Sustainable Community Development* at Simon Fraser University, Myriam contributes to research, education and conferences on Stakeholder Engagement. She is also a *Dialogue Associate* with the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, Simon Fraser University. [Myriam Laberge](mailto:myriam@myriamlaberge.ca), President, Breakthroughs UNLIMITED Inc., 604.943.9133, myriam@myriamlaberge.ca

