Facilitative Leadership: One Approach to Empowering Staff and Other Stakeholders

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Abstract

THIS ARTICLE DEFINES FACILITATIVE LEADERSHIP as advocated by Roger Schwarz and describes the use of this relatively new leadership approach in a public library system. It lists and defines the four core values followed in Schwarz's approach: valid information, free and informed choice, internal commitment, and compassion. It further describes the use of left-hand column cases as developed by Chris Argyris to identify one's own theory in use. Model one and model two theories in use as developed by Argyris are discussed. The article then briefly describes the experiences of using the Schwarz principles in a library organization.

Facilitative leadership is a term that is used for a number of different methods of providing leadership within the workplace. Many different trainers and organizations use the term. It means different things to each of them. A quick Internet search results in many hits for the term. Educators use it to describe a way of leading school change. Religious leaders use it to describe a way of leading congregations. Consultants use it to describe ways of leading organizations. One consultant group (Interaction Associates) has even registered the phrase as a trademark. All involve some sort of training in new ways to lead people or organizations.

Fran Rees is one of a handful of authors on the subject of facilitative leadership. She identifies leadership skills along a continuum from persuasion through collaboration to facilitation and says that at various times a leader must be prepared to engage each approach. She writes:

> The leader who can take the role of a facilitator blends his or her role of visionary decisive leader with that of listening and empowering leader. As a facilitative leader he or she involves followers as much as possible in creating the group's vision and purpose, carrying out the vision and purpose, and building a productive and cohesive team. Facilitation can be seen as a leadership *approach.* (Rees, 1998, pp. 17–18)

In another of her works, Rees identifies a basic tenet of facilitative leadership: "A facilitative leader is someone who acts on the premise that *a leader does not do for others what they can do for themselves*" (Rees, 2001, p. 60).

Roger Schwarz devotes a full chapter in his classic work on facilitation to defining and elaborating on the concept of *facilitative leadership* (Schwarz, 2002, pp. 327–343). "Facilitative leadership is a values-based, systemic leadership philosophy founded on the core values and assumptions, principles, and methods of the Skilled Facilitator approach. The facilitative leader helps groups and individuals become more effective through building their capacity to reflect on and improve the way they work" (Schwarz, 2002, p. 327). Following a discussion of the need for a new approach to leadership, Schwarz continues: "Organizations need the type of leader who works from a set of core values consistent with the concepts of empowerment, commitment, collaboration, learning, and partnership. The core values and principles underlying the Skilled Facilitator approach constitute a foundation for becoming such a leader—what I call a *facilitative leader*" (Schwarz, 2002, p. 330). He also adds that facilitative leadership can be practiced by anyone in an organization, regardless of level or leadership responsibility (Schwarz, 2002, p. 328). The particular method of facilitative leadership that I have employed for the past decade is based upon Schwarz's work.

The approach described by Schwarz and employed in his facilitation training and consultation activities is based on an explicit set of core values that work in any circumstance, be it personal or professional. Chris Argyris and Donald Schoen initially developed the concepts that led to the articulation of these core values. Schwarz refined and codified them as core values: *valid information, free and informed choice,* and *internal commitment.* While simply stated, these core values have a depth of import that needs further explanation. In the last edition of his book, Schwarz added a fourth core value that he named *compassion.*

Core values are the principles that guide one's actions in all aspects of one's life. In most instances these core values or underlying beliefs are implicitly understood but usually are not explicitly articulated. What Schwarz has done is to articulate the core values by which he wants to live his life. He has articulated them in such a way that others may choose to adopt them as their guiding principles as well. These four core values are the foundation upon which Schwarz has based his brand of facilitative leadership. What follows is a fuller discussion of what these core values mean within

the context of Schwarz's facilitative leadership. It is worth noting that, in many approaches to leadership, the core values underlying them are not articulated and have to be inferred through the actions that are the result of following the particular approach chosen. The premises behind the core values are the following:

It is not possible to make good and consistent decisions without *valid information.* Valid information is information that is independently confirmable. It should relate directly to the subject at hand. No parts of the information can be held back, including one's own feelings and assumptions that influence how the issue may be addressed. This core value encourages the use of specific examples that help illustrate the issues being discussed so that all involved can understand what is meant. An important element of this core value is to share the reasoning why one believes that the conclusions reached are valid and true. A good test for sharing information might be, "If I am thinking it, I probably ought to share what I am thinking, even when what I am thinking is not very pleasant."

Free and informed choice relies on the first core value to provide the valid information for the informed portion of this value. Because one has valid information it is possible to make a decision that is free of outside pressures. When one makes a decision or commitment within this framework, she is confident that the choice is one that she can carry out because the decision is truly hers and has been made on the best information available. Because of necessary societal and workplace rules and regulations, all decisions are not necessarily free in the strict sense of the word. While one may be able to freely choose not to follow workplace regulations, one of the consequences of not following those regulations may well be that continued employment is no longer possible. It is very important that those societal and workplace rules and regulations be made known, so that informed choices within those constraints are possible.

The logical consequence of free and informed choice is *internal commitment.* This internal commitment to the decision happens because the individual knows that he has all of the relevant information that was necessary to make the decision and that he made it knowing all of the restraints and consequences. Because of this the person owns and willingly lives with the decision. There is another component of internal commitment that might not be obvious at first: being internally committed to seeking valid information in relation to the decision. This component keeps the decision a dynamic one. It means that it is not possible to make a decision and never have to think about it again. It means being open to information that might not support your decision.

These three core values work together in a reinforcing circle. One first seeks and shares valid information, uses that valid information to make an informed decision, and is internally committed to the decision and to continuing to seek valid information.

The fourth core value of *compassion* is not as clearly defined as the first three. One of the reasons for this is that the word *compassion* has many meanings already imbedded in it that are not what Schwarz ascribes to this value. The difficulty with this value is that it is almost easier to say what it is not than what it is. Compassion is the ability to temporarily suspend judgment when listening to others. One suspends judgment so that he can truly understand the other person's viewpoint. By doing this the listener is able to demonstrate a genuine concern for and interest in what other people have to say. Better understanding does result in an opportunity to further use the other core values. Compassion means that one intends to try to understand the other person's point of view, to empathize with that person, and to be willing to help that person if that is the appropriate action. With compassion the suspension of judgment is only temporary. At some point the listener must decide if the information gathered meets the test of validity so that it can be used as part of the decision-making process. Compassion does not mean rescue. It does not mean feeling sorry for someone. It does not mean discounting the other person's ability to make a decision or act in a way consistent with the core values.

I had the opportunity to speak with Roger Schwarz as he was developing his thinking on the meaning and purpose of this core value. One of the critiques that Schwarz had received was that his ground rules were very rational and had little if any room for emotion in them. Schwarz's response was to add an element that he believes is less rational and more emotive. He struggled to find a word to describe this element. He wanted a word free from connotations that might be different from what he wanted. He was unable to find such a word, so he settled on compassion.

The core values of facilitative leadership are the underlying principles that guide the actions of a facilitative leader. Schwarz has developed a set of ground rules that help individuals and groups to act in ways that are consistent with those core values. The original list was made up of sixteen different ground rules, which have since been condensed into the nine listed in Table 1. These ground rules are action strategies that can be used in groups by agreement or by the facilitative leader on his own. When used appropriately, these action strategies assist the facilitative leader to live the core values.

When teaching about facilitative leadership, Schwarz uses a technique first used by Chris Argyris and called the *left-hand column exercise* (Argyris, 1999, p. 61). This exercise helps a leader to identify and explore the various action strategies that he uses as a leader. What Argyris identified was that many, if not most, leaders said they would act in one way, but during difficult encounters with others did not act that way. He identified this tendency through the left-hand column exercise. This is how it works: Individuals are asked to remember a difficult conversation they had with an individual or in a group setting. The person remembering the conversation is asked to

Table 1. The Nine Ground Rules Roger Schwarz Recommends for Effective Groups

Test assumptions and inferences.
Share all relevant information.
Use specific examples and agree on what important words mean.
Explain your reasoning and intent.
Focus on interests, not positions.
Combine advocacy and inquiry.
Jointly design next steps and ways to test disagreements.
Discuss undiscussable issues.
Use a decision-making rule that generates the level of commitment needed.

Note. Based on *The skilled facilitator: A comprehensive resource for consultants, facilitators, managers, trainers, and coaches* (p. 97), by R. Schwarz, 2002, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

write down the conversation as best he can remember it on the right half of a sheet of paper. He is asked to record all of the conversation, not just what he said. Argyris then asks the participant to write down what he was thinking in the left-hand column of the paper. What Argyris discovered was that what participants thought and what they said were not the same thing. In addition, what they did was not in alignment with what they said they would do as a leader. Argyris called what an individual said they would do their *espoused theory*. He called what they did their *theory in use*. He also identified two *theories of action* (Argyris, 1999, p. 60). He called them *model one* and *model two*. He identifies the *model one* theory as unilateral control, win-lose theory. *Model two* theory is a mutual learning, win-win theory. Argyris says that 98 percent of managers across the world operate in a model one frame. What Argyris also found was that the model one frame did not get the results that managers using it wanted. Frequently they got just the opposite result. He attributes this result in part to not sharing all relevant information and not testing the underlying assumptions that guide one's actions. Because the model two theory of action is based on sharing relevant information necessary to make good decisions, and results in fewer errors, Argyris advocates model two as the preferred model, since managers using that model get better results—results more in line with what they want.

By using the left-hand column exercise, it is possible to discover one's own theory in use. Many of us who have written a left-hand column exercise are surprised to find out that our theory in use does not match our espoused theory. The core values of facilitative leadership, as advocated by Schwarz, make it possible for a person to bring his theory in use and his espoused theory into closer alignment, especially if the espoused theory is closer to model two and the theory in use is closer to model one.

Facilitative leadership is a method of leadership that fits well into libraries because it is compatible with other tools and principles that are already in use in libraries. It provides built-in tests to see if the other tools are compatible and fit into the core values.

Some other tools that I have found to be compatible with facilitative leadership are the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI), Systems Thinking (Senge, 1994), various problem solving models, the stewardship principles advocated by Peter Block (Block, 1993), and the leadership concepts of Kouzes and Posner (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). These tools all can help understanding of others or give a framework that is compatible with Schwarz's framework. The MBTI helps one understand how people are different and how they are the same. Systems Thinking helps one see how everything is connected.

If one is using different tools as a leader in an organization, Schwarz's core values provide tests that will show how compatible these tools are. The simplest that I can think of is the use of anonymous feedback in a 360–degree evaluation tool. If the feedback is anonymous, it is pretty difficult for the facilitative leader to test the validity of the information by talking to the evaluator. The unstated, untested, underlying premise of such a system is that honest feedback cannot occur unless the one giving feedback remains anonymous. Schwarz would advocate that one of the most important pieces of information when getting 360–degree feedback is who is giving the feedback. By being able to check with the evaluator to find out what he meant if there is a lack of clarity or a disagreement about what is reported, the person being evaluated is able to discover information that would be impossible to gain if the evaluator remained anonymous. The person receiving the evaluation is able to understand why the rater says what he says, and that makes for a better evaluation tool.

In the Wake County Public Library System, nearly forty staff members have been trained in the principles of facilitative leadership. System administrators believe that all staff members are leaders, so the training has not been limited to the few administrators of the system. All staff attempt to practice the skills of the facilitative leader every day. They hang up poster-sized copies of the core values and ground rules in meeting spaces and in their offices. They constantly try to verify information as valid by using the many tools that the ground rules provide. Sometimes they succeed, and sometimes they fail. Leadership using these skills is not an easy task. It is not possible to cruise along on automatic pilot and use these skills. It is important to consciously keep the values in mind as one continues through the day. This is especially true during stressful times, for that is the time when one is less likely to follow these principles.

The Wake County Public Library System has been using the principles of facilitative leadership for more than eight years. I am aware of at least one other library that has embraced a form of facilitative leadership—the University of Arizona Library. Some local governments in North Carolina have invested significant time and effort to implement facilitative leadership within their structure. Examples include the City of Laurinburg and the City of Fayetteville. Laurinburg's experience has been documented in

the literature (Davidson & McMahon, 1999). Each of these cities has been practicing these principles for at least five years, and many other communities have embraced facilitative leadership. The work by Svara and associates reflects on that experience (Svara, 1994).

Facilitation is not rescue. Facilitation helps people do things they might not be able to do on their own, or at least need help doing on their own. Facilitation does not do things for people that they can do on their own. Facilitative leadership helps people to better understand each other so that common goals can be established, agreed upon, committed to, and reached.

Facilitative leadership has helped the staff of the Wake County Library System reach better decisions, learn from their mistakes, and engage in more meaningful conversations than before. The library system is a human organization, so it still fails to do what the staff says it wants to do. The big difference is that now the staff recognize when that happens and use those occasions to analyze why it happened so that they really learn from their mistakes. By taking the time to figure out how the mistakes happened, by sharing the information that led the group to define what happened as a mistake, and by not assigning blame, this organization is able to construct more effective actions when correcting their mistakes. They are also able to give guidance for future situations so that the same type of mistake does not happen again.

This was best illustrated when a new hire was brought on board. Those who were involved in the hiring decision each had small doubts about the new hire, but they did not share them with each other. The new hire did not successfully integrate into the system and eventually left. After the individual left, those involved in the initial hire shared their initial doubts with each other and were surprised to learn that they each had similar doubts. Had they shared them initially, more time would have been spent with the candidate. The group also agreed that, for all future hires, they would share with all involved in the hiring decision all of their concerns. While this may seem obvious to some, this group found it freeing. By sharing everything they thought about potential job candidates, they were able to discuss all strengths and weaknesses and to address those with the candidates themselves. By following this process in the future, the staff believes that it will hire people who better fit into the organization. The evidence from recent hires seems to support that belief.

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