

CO-FACILITATION

Multiple Facilitators to Serving the Group

Background: Co-Facilitation is an extremely useful approach to working with groups for a variety of reasons. Yet, very little has been written on the topic. It is assumed that everything that applies to the facilitator, or facilitation, also applies to the co-facilitator, or co-facilitation. Yet these assumptions fail to consider the relationships between all the parties involved in co-facilitation. In this article I will define co-facilitation, discuss the advantages and dis-advantages, and a few other considerations.

Defining Co-Facilitation: Co-facilitation has been around for as long as there have been two facilitators in the same room. Yet, to date only one book is available on the topic. In *Co-Facilitation: A Practical Guide to Using Partnerships in Facilitation*, Joanna Knight and Warren Scott define Co-Facilitation as: "...two or more facilitators working together in a partnership to enable a group and its individual members to reach an agreed outcome in a way that maximizes their own and others learning, through the active involvement of all."

Marie Martin of Learning Conversations defines Co-Facilitation as "a dynamic working relationship focused on the task of facilitating a group, involving strong, self-reliant individuals who share a commitment to each other, the task of co-facilitation and the profession." Co-facilitators develop and implement processes for working together, as well as processes for working with the group, to achieve the group's desired outcomes.

Partnering with another facilitator has a number of advantages and potential disadvantages both to the facilitators and to the clients.

Advantages:

1. **Developing Facilitators:** Co-Facilitation provides support for the inexperienced facilitator. By agreeing to support each other anxiety can be greatly reduced. One of the best methods for

learning is modeling group-process skills to the less experienced.

2. **Training New Methods:** Even experienced facilitators can take advantage of a co-facilitation to learn methods, techniques, and styles. One doesn't have to attend a class to watch and learn from a good facilitator.

3. **Complex Issues:** Co-facilitation brings a disengaged eye and ear to the process that can be of great benefit to a group. The disengaged facilitator can see the group from a different perspective than the facilitator actively engaged with the group.

4. **Modeling Relationships:** The type of co-operation required to co-facilitate provides an excellent model for the types of relationships our clients need to work effectively together.

5. **Synergy:** Each facilitator brings with them their own special being, skills, talents, experience, and modes of expression which, when focused on an issue interact to form a valuable approach that neither could generate alone.

6. **Large Groups:** Co-Facilitation is extremely valuable when working with large groups. Even groups as small as 16 to 20 can benefit from co-facilitators. With large groups facilitators break groups into smaller teams to create fewer interactions to deal with. Co-facilitators can multiply the interactions by working in parallel with small groups.

7. **Facilitator Has The Answers:** Co-facilitation reduces the possible projection that 'the facilitator' has all the answers.

8. **Energy Saving:** Working with a group can be tremendously draining on a facilitator. Being able to tag off with a co-facilitator can extend the energy of the facilitator by giving them down time during an event.

9. **Extended Client Coverage:** What happens if an event is scheduled and the facilitator gets too sick to facilitate the session? Having a co-facilitator provides a ready, current, and client known backup for unexpected illnesses.

Facilitator's Body of Knowledge Research Project

There are additional benefits that can be found in the roles the Co-facilitators fill:

Observer: Having a co-facilitator provides for a present observer of the process and participation.

Sounding Board: The co-facilitator also serves as a sounding board during the design and preparation process.

Time keeper: The co-facilitator can watch the time and provide signals to the active facilitator releasing them to focus on the group.

Drawbacks or Concerns

As mentioned earlier there are some potential issues one must be aware of with co-facilitation.

1. **Facilitator Disagreement:** It is probable, that there will be some disagreement on how to handle some aspect of the workshop due to the facilitators differing styles. This can lead to conflicting messages, confusion with the client, and competition between the facilitators that present adverse modeling.

2. **Different Orientations:** Individuals with different orientations-theoretical, technical, personal-can easily impair each other's effect in the group. It is, for example, difficult to imagine a good melding of a Tavistock-oriented "consultant" and an Esalen-trained encounter group leader.

3. **Extra Energy:** Co-facilitating takes energy. The potential benefit can conversely be a drawback when a co-facilitator is "high maintenance", requiring as much energy as the group.

4. **Threat for Participants:** For some individuals two facilitators serving a group may be seen as colluding with each other to drive a specific agenda.

5. **Competition:** Co-facilitators can become competitive with each other. Although they may deny any concern for popularity, they may, without knowing it, engage in behavior that meets personal needs instead of the groups.

Support and Equality in the Partnership:

Some believe that Co-Facilitation can only exist

when all facilitators share responsibility equally. In my experience, this never happens. One facilitator should always act as the Lead Facilitator with the other(s) filling supporting roles, even when the supporting facilitator becomes the active facilitator during portions of the workshop. With a designated Lead Facilitator, ultimately, the client knows who to address issues with.

Who should use co-facilitation?

Any facilitator, experience or novice, can take advantage of co-facilitation as a tool for continued development. When both facilitators are inexperienced partnering will spread the stress. Working together to plan, facilitate and reflect on what you learned is highly developmental. When one facilitator is experienced working with a new/novice facilitator the relationship can be valuable and rewarding both ways. Facilitative Leaders can work with a co-facilitator as a great way to gain feedback and develop additional skills.

Application:

Co-Facilitators is an incredibly useful approach to facilitator development once the junior facilitator has received formal training in the group process. It is also a great way to learn about them before making a long-term decision to work with other facilitators.

Resources:



Co-Facilitation: A Practical Guide to Using Teamwork in Facilitation (Paperback)

by Joanna Knight, Warren Scott

Publisher: Kogan Page; 1st Edition (Aug. 97) \$30.00

ISBN-13: 978-0749428020

Marie Martin of Learning Conversations:

http://www.learningconversations.com.au/index_files/page0007.htm

J. William Pfeiffer and John E. Jones:

http://www.asamra.army.mil/eo/eo_docs/Co-facilitation.htm