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THE NOVICE TO EXPERT JOURNEY

In this chapter, we describe how facilitators can move from novice to expert levels in their ability to intervene when disruptive events occur. Readers will be able to place themselves along a continuum of novice to expert and learn about appropriate next steps at their stage of the journey. We begin with an example that demonstrates the work of an expert facilitator—knowing just how and when to intervene to keep both individuals and group members working toward productive ends.

The group is challenging. Participants' resistance is growing, and suddenly, a strident voice bursts out, "This is a waste of time!" Group members hold their breaths and wait for the facilitator's next move. The facilitator's response to this kind of challenge separates the novice from the expert. A novice may try to justify and run the risk of getting into an argument. The expert knows how to listen and move toward a resolution.

Consider this expert series of moves demonstrated by a colleague. As he tells it, 90 minutes into a work session, a teacher angrily shouted out, "What does this have to do with algebra?" Even an experienced facilitator will be taken aback by unexpected

outbursts and has to calm himself before dealing with the situation. This is the intervention pattern our colleague used.

Step 1: Paused, breathed, and moved toward the speaker. This is an important step because it helps the facilitator monitor and adjust his internal state.

Step 2: Asked for the speaker's name. From this point on, the conversation is no longer anonymous.

Step 3: Used the speaker's tone to paraphrase so that the speaker knew that his emotion was understood. In a firm, but slightly angry tone, the facilitator said something like, "You're upset because what we are doing seems like a waste of time to you." Getting agreement about the speaker's emotional state is a critical move. The speaker responds with an affirmation or a clarification.

Step 4: The facilitator made a polite inquiry as to the difficulty the speaker was having and began to move the conversation toward productive resolution. Now in a normal tone of voice he said, "Help me understand the problem you are having." He attempted to talk through the difficulty. This step does not take more than a minute of group time. If a resolution will take longer, the facilitator moves to the next step.

Step 5: The facilitator in this case said something like, "I now recognize that this challenge deserves more time than we have right now. Can you hang out until the break when we can work to resolve the issue?"

Step 6: At break time, the facilitator had a private conversation in an attempt to resolve the issue. Most people will agree to meet at the break, and 99% of the time, they will show up

ready to solve the problem. They often just want to be listened to, and once they are, their resistance evaporates. For those not willing to meet at the break, the expert facilitator moves to Step 7.

Step 7: The facilitator would say, “You seem to be between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, you feel mandated to be here; on the other hand, you are not producing value for yourself and your students. You have a difficult choice. Stay here and I will do what I can to help you make connections to your students, or leave the room and do something else that will benefit your algebra students more than being here. Know that I will support you 100% whichever decision you make.” With that, the facilitator would turn and walk away from the participant, enforcing the principle of never taking choice away in difficult confrontations.

This example demonstrates the work of an expert facilitator—knowing just how and when to intervene to keep both individuals and group members working toward productive ends. The point is the facilitator was able to recognize this outburst as threatening to the group, was able to ground himself, and worked directly with the situation. With his actions, he communicated in a way that the group learned that such outbursts would be handled safely and respectfully. He demonstrated his clear intention to protect the group and his commitment to a larger theme—that the time spent together should be useful. He communicated a deep respect for group members’ right to dissent while also requiring the dissenter to become part of the solution.

A facilitator without much experience will have a much more difficult time when faced with threatening challenges. Beginners

faced with such animosity often crumble as their brain, specifically the amygdala, goes into overdrive and urges the body toward automatic responses appropriate to physical danger, wiping from their motor memory the rules they might have learned for dealing with disruptions. Novice facilitators necessarily relegate the majority of their attention trying to practice rudimentary facilitation techniques, or they become distracted or flustered when things do not go according to plan. Much of the time, the novice responds with a defensive posture or judgmentally.

Accomplished facilitators respond elegantly to the unexpected because they've learned how to effectively anticipate, predict, and modify their approaches to problems in the moment as necessary. Expert facilitators' learning arc is enhanced because they are self-directed learners—self-monitoring, self-reflective, and self-modifying. Over time, they have rehearsed and practiced sequences of moves, and they are able to link complex moves together into coherent and successful interventions.

To intervene means to take action to change what is happening or might happen to prevent counterproductive behaviors. The goals for intervening always are to improve group performance or to develop the group's capacity for effective and efficient work. We believe that effective intervention is a moral imperative; time is a valuable asset that ought not to be wasted, and when all voices contribute, the sum is greater than the parts.

WE ALL BEGIN AS NOVICES

A novice is someone who has not yet acquired the skills and experience needed to perform a trade, a career, or a profession—in this case, the skills of intervention. To a novice, the expert's skills may

seem invisible or even magical. They are unaware of the expert's subtle abilities to recognize patterns and possibilities. Based on these, the expert is also clear about intentions and follows through on these intentions in congruent ways.

In medicine, doctors serve internships. In business, beginning executives often are mentored. As they are mentored, beginners are expected to hone their metacognitive skills, along with increasing their knowledge and performance-related skills, to speed the journey to becoming an accomplished professional. In the teaching profession, novices are called “beginning teachers” and provided special support during their novice years. Beginning facilitators seldom have such deliberate support. Often, novice facilitators have limited practice time. The information in this book gives leaders a head start with skills we have honed over the course of two careers. We offer you an opportunity to envision success by learning from our experiences as experts in the field. The journey to competence takes time, commitment, and patience.

Everyone starts as a novice and, over time, in the right settings with much practice, can become accomplished in successfully intervening with groups. Working toward a status of expert or accomplished facilitator must be a conscious decision. Remembering our years as novices, we recognize that becoming an expert facilitator is a journey that never ends. Just when we think we have mastered the art, a group challenges us in ways that require new expertise, and we are once again improvising new solutions.

Authors Malcolm Gladwell (2008) and Matthew Syed (2010) point out that in any field, expertise is less a matter of talent than of practice. The term *expert* has come to mean a person with an unassailable grasp of the field, one who operates at not merely a

good level, but at a level nearer to perfect. Several studies have shown that people enter this rarified state after many hours of engagement and practice—10,000 hours is the figure most commonly used.

Because investing thousands of hours in refining facilitation skills is not feasible for most, we use the term *accomplished* to represent the end of the continuum toward which we strive. Gladwell (2008) and Syed (2010) emphasize that novices need to work through trial and error and to become responsible for figuring out solutions. A coach or mentor may help along the way, but in the end, the learner is in control of the skills that are practiced and that become part of an ever-increasing repertoire.

ACCOMPLISHED MEANS COMPETENT

The path to mastery requires that learners move through five phases—from being unaware or uninformed to becoming highly accomplished and able to use skills both consciously and unconsciously. The keys to mastery are time and persistence. Figure 1.1 shows the path from being uninformed to accomplished facilitation.

Uninformed

At this stage, the facilitator is simply unaware of responsibilities and strategies associated with intervening. Facilitators view meetings as necessary and outside of their overt control.

Novice

The true novice level is *conscious incompetence*—knowing what one doesn't know. The novice realizes there is a better way. In



Figure 1.1 The Learner's Path—From Uninformed to Highly Accomplished

<p>Uninformed <i>Unconscious incompetence</i></p>	<p>The individual is not aware of what he or she doesn't know.</p>
<p>Novice <i>Conscious incompetence</i></p>	<p>The facilitator knows that more elegant ways to respond exist, but needs to learn control and to acquire mental maps and intervention strategies. She needs opportunities to practice, both in real time and through mental rehearsal. Trial and error is necessary to learning.</p>
<p>Proficient <i>Conscious competence</i></p>	<p>The facilitator is not fluent or elegant in the face of uncertainty, but is able to respond and adapt. He needs to consciously focus, meaning responses are purposeful and require mental energy that will not be needed as more expertise develops. The facilitator is just beginning to improvise and adapt. He requires mental energy and may lapse into decision fatigue.</p>
<p>Accomplished <i>Unconscious competence</i></p>	<p>The facilitator is accomplished and able to respond, adapt, and improvise in the face of uncertainty. She has committed many complex moves to routine memory and no longer requires conscious thought to access these skills. The facilitator trusts herself and maintains control, even when faced with the unexpected.</p>
<p>Highly accomplished/expert <i>Conscious of unconscious competence</i></p>	<p>The facilitator recognizes all the levels of learning and can explicate and consciously model the nuances of the discipline. He recognizes the need for learners to go through these phases and that interventions and strategies may be different for each phase. This is the optimum level to be a teacher of others.</p>

this valuable phase of learning, the learner begins to identify and focus on appropriate learning goals and to practice skills. This practitioner sets goals but does not have the knowledge, skills, and experience to be fluent. Many people cycle between *conscious incompetence* and *conscious competence*—just when one skill is mastered, a group offers a new challenge that makes the facilitator aware once more of her incompetence. Moving out of this stage requires persistence. Taking time after the public performance to mentally rehearse other strategies is helpful. (See box.)

Mental Rehearsal Improves Performance

Researchers are finding that mental rehearsal can be as valuable as actual practice (McTaggart, 2008). In mental imagery, athletes imagine they are actually competing, breaking down the game into tiny components and visualizing how they might improve specific aspects. Both EMG and electroencephalogram tests have shown that the brain does not differentiate between a thought and an action (Iacaboni, 2008). In tests with skiers, basketball players, weightlifters, boxers, and even those dealing with illness, the brain's electrical activity is the same whether the individual is thinking about doing something or actually doing it. We believe that facilitators can learn to mentally rehearse scenarios with difficult groups and to edit these scenes to imagine themselves using successful strategies. For example, even driving home after a staff meeting, one can mentally rehearse different responses to a situation that did not go well so that next time when an original intervention doesn't work, one can have a second or even third to try.

Proficient

Aikido Master George Leonard (1991) describes the level of *conscious competence* as the stage of deepest learning. It is energy intensive and tiring because the individual is making neurological and psychological adjustments. He is unlearning old patterns of responding. At this stage, learners may be tempted to give up practicing because the new application requires so much energy. For a while, learners may even be less effective than before. Persisting through the mechanical state of conscious competence is what builds essential routines. Moves are self-conscious, and others may notice or even criticize the practitioner. At this stage, it sometimes helps to declare your learning status and transform a stumble into a public learning opportunity.

Accomplished

Principles, skills, and strategies have been internalized so that the facilitator's moves appear effortless and effective. At this phase, mental energy is available to think several steps ahead, innovate with new approaches, and consider alternatives if what is tried does not work. This is a learning stage of refinement and experimentation as the facilitator moves beyond her boundaries.

Highly Accomplished/Expert

While the ultimate goal is to be excellent, helping others gain expertise may be even more of a goal. The most accomplished professionals have practiced for years and are conscious of their unconscious expertise; they are ready to teach others. The accomplished facilitator has perfected varied interventions that have become automatic and unconscious, bundling multiple moves

to ensure smooth and seamless interventions. Think of a skilled musician who has not only memorized the music but shows passion, moving in ways that complement the music, movement that would have been unimaginable when she was still plunking away at scales. With conscious attention, this expert could also become an accomplished teacher.

PROFICIENCY SCALE

We have summarized the five levels of development in Figure 1.2 that will help the reader self-diagnose his level of skill development. We provide suggestions for how to improve at each level. This book is sequenced and designed to help a facilitator grow and learn. We also recommend some of our favorite references and Web sites. It is not always evident to facilitators that groups respond in direct correlation to the skill of the facilitator. When leaders fail to take responsibility for facilitation and appropriate interventions, groups will often flounder. Often the ineffective facilitator blames the group, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. In our chaotic times, efficient use of time and emotional well-being are essential attributes for an organization. It is, therefore, a moral imperative for leaders to develop their ability to facilitate and intervene as appropriate.

ATTRIBUTES OF THE EXPERT

Facilitation is information intensive. Experts have for years cited George Miller's seminal 1956 research demonstrating that the human mind can hold just seven, plus or minus two, bits of

Figure 1.2 Locate Yourself on a Proficiency Scale

Consider how your skill level impacts the groups you work with. Consider a plan for your personal development.

Facilitator Stage	Facilitator Characteristics	Group Response	What You Can Do
Unaware	Lacks knowledge or information about facilitation or intervention skills. Passively accepts what happens in meetings as outside of her control. Attributes problems to others, not to leadership of the meeting.	Groups respond with frustration and report that meetings waste time, overwhelm them, have unproductive conflict, and often spin endlessly on topics of little value.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Begin with reading Chapter 2: Preparing and Managing Nervousness. ■ Read sequentially throughout the rest of the book. ■ Acquire essential foundation knowledge of facilitation work by reading the seminal book <i>How to Make Meetings Work</i> by Doyle and Straus (1976), <i>Unlocking Group Potential for Improving Schools</i> by Garmston (2012), <i>Manager's Guide to Effective Meetings</i> by Streibel (2003), or <i>Best Practices for Facilitation</i> by Sibbet (2002).
Novice	Knows basic facilitation skills—how to get a group's attention, set focus and agenda, and manage transitions. May have difficulty leading decision-making processes.	Meeting tones are not consistent; sometimes the work goes well and other times it is stalled. This inconsistent positive reinforcement may give the illusion that	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Begin by reading Chapter 3: Intervention Principles to acquire insights about when to intervene and ways to go about it. ■ Volunteer to facilitate portions of meetings to automate basic facilitation moves. ■ Practice facilitation principles and moves when working with students. ■ Observe colleagues. Take notes about their decisions and explore their thinking after the session.

Facilitator Stage	Facilitator Characteristics	Group Response	What You Can Do
	Sees the difficult participant as an impediment to progress and lacks skills to intervene effectively.	the group is more capable; however, when things get tough, the meeting breaks down. Groups blame a difficult person as the problem, and are not aware of any contribution they, as a group, might be making to problems. When the difficult person is absent, everyone notices how well the meeting went.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Cofacilitate and have a reflecting conversation afterward. ■ Facilitate and seek coaching. ■ Learn more about problem solving in groups and intervening by reading books such as <i>Unlocking Group Potential</i> by Garmston (2012), <i>Don't Just Do Something, Stand There! Ten Principles for Leading Meetings That Matter</i> by Weisbord and Janoff (2007), or <i>The Leader's Handbook: A Guide to Inspiring Your People and Managing the Daily Workflow</i> by Scholtes (1998).
Proficient	Has basic facilitation skills and can manage routine problems effortlessly in meetings. Views exceptional problems as challenges to	Groups perceive their meetings as effortless and may not attribute the success to the facilitator. However, when the facilitator is	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Begin with reading Chapter 4: Deciding to Intervene. ■ View Focusing Four video to observe a master facilitator conducting a consensus session (Garmston & Dolcemascolo, 2009). ■ Schedule a planning conversation with a colleague prior to a difficult meeting and reflect with him or her after the session.

(Continued)

Figure 1.2 (Continued)

Facilitator Stage	Facilitator Characteristics	Group Response	What You Can Do
	<p>solve over time. After a meeting reflects and learns by mentally revising the possible interventions and outcomes. Considers multiple options to employ should behaviors happen again.</p>	<p>absent they begin to notice a qualitative difference. A strong facilitator can become paternalistic keeping order, but not helping group members grow and learn. Groups can become dependent on the leader and stuck in their growth.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Seek every opportunity to practice and schedule a planning conversation with a colleague before the meeting and reflect with this person after the meeting. ■ Become a facilitative participant in meetings you attend. This means you practice these skills when not the formally appointed leader. ■ Seek new references that have skill building information and read and envision how to apply the skills. Find an opportunity to practice. ■ Create a quick reference library with books such as <i>Thinker Toys: A Handbook of Business Creativity</i> by Michalko (1991), <i>The Presenter's Fieldbook: A Practical Guide</i> by Garmston (2005), or <i>Resonate: Present Visual Stories That Transform Audiences</i> by Duarte (2010).
Accomplished	<p>Is able to respond, adapt, and improvise in the face of uncertainty. Sees self as responsible to the groups' success and does not blame</p>	<p>Groups report that they learn not only about how to do their job better but also how to work effectively with others. They begin to appreciate the quiet</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Explore Chapters 4 through 7. ■ Learn from a master by reading books such as <i>The Skilled Facilitator</i> by Schwartz (2002). ■ Set specific goals for yourself such as using certain strategies should an opportunity arise, paraphrasing before taking new comments, or consciously applying one of the intervention principles found in Chapter 3.

Facilitator Stage	Facilitator Characteristics	Group Response	What You Can Do
	<p>others. Consciously works to shift responsibility to the group and to teach the group about facilitation and intervention principles. Able to teach facilitation skills and interventions.</p>	<p>voice that finally speaks up or the loud voice that shows humility. They understand how dissenting views can be catalysts for deeper thinking. They transfer facilitation and intervention skills to other aspects of their life. Skilled facilitators quietly celebrate when they observe explicit carryover of skills used in one setting to another. For example a teacher might use paraphrasing as way to help students hold onto ideas, or a PLC member may use</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Seek out colleagues with similar skill sets and collaborate on ideas. ■ Keep a facilitator’s notebook with ideas, references, and reflections. ■ Join online community or follow a blog on organizational development. See list created by Terrence Seamon at http://learningvoyager.blogspot.com/2006/12/od-blogs-abound.html. ■ Seek opportunities to teach about facilitation and interventions. ■ Use first, second, third, and fourth point as a communication tool, as described in Chapter 6.

(Continued)

Figure 1.2 (Continued)

Facilitator Stage	Facilitator Characteristics	Group Response	What You Can Do
Expert	<p>Acts intuitively. Has many sets of linked steps that are performed unconsciously. Conscious of choices being made and could reveal the meta-cognition of facilitation to others. Regularly teaches the group about interventions using graphics, modeling, and third-point teaching.</p>	<p>outcome thinking to keep the group focused.</p> <p>Groups report that they are also learning to facilitate groups in effective ways. Members are increasingly willing to and capable of assuming leadership positions in this and other groups.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Begin with Chapter 7: Strategies for Advanced Facilitation. ■ Read earlier chapters as applicable. ■ Learn about how stages of adult development affect decision making by reading books such as <i>Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization</i>, by Kegan and Lahey (2009). ■ Teach, observe, and coach others.

information at a time. Newer research casts doubts on this idea. Nelson Corwin at the University of Missouri–Columbia states that most of us can handle just three to four pieces of information, depending on the complexity of the information, external conditions, and one’s stress level (Rock, 2009).

Top facilitators learn to chunk information so that as they envision a move, they activate a series of linked steps that help create expert interventions. A colleague of ours, Kendall Zoller, advises facilitators to memorize the first five minutes of any interaction they plan with a group. Saying hello, establishing rapport, getting permission to facilitate, and framing the agenda all are routines within one chunk that could be named “start the meeting.” These maps are created through experience and by embedding routine patterns through practice to levels of automaticity (unconscious competence).

Brain research has demonstrated that planning and monitoring behaviors occur in the frontal cortex and consume massive amounts of energy (Rock, 2009). By working to create automaticity, the facilitator can maximize brain energy and pay attention simultaneously to multiple variables. Skilled facilitators have routines for the five essentials for effective facilitation described in *Unlocking Group Potential* (Garmston, 2012).

We started this chapter with an example of an expert who recognized an outburst as threatening to the group, was able to ground himself, and worked directly with the situation. With his actions, he communicated in a way that the group learned that such outbursts would be handled safely and respectfully and that they would not be tolerated. Our expert facilitator demonstrated a clear intention to protect the group and a commitment to a larger theme—that the time spent together should be useful, positive, and productive. He communicated a deep respect for group members’ right to dissent while also requiring the participant to become part of the solution.



SUMMARY

The journey from being unaware to expert is not just a matter of learning new intervention strategies. Reflection is the essential handmaiden to development through these stages. Experience alone is not our only teacher; rather, it is the reflective processes in which we engage that produces growth. Anticipating intervention needs, selecting and employing interventions, and then analyzing their effects are more important than having a range of interventions on which to draw. We have both learned by mentally revising our responses in a meeting that did not go smoothly, envisioning alternative and more successful responses. Experience has taught us that ineffective behavioral patterns repeat themselves, and the accomplished facilitator needs to be ready with a repertoire of response behavior sets. We have found that successful mental rehearsal is the best prescription—it builds personal confidence, and one of the hallmarks of the novice is anxiety about potential pitfalls. Appropriately, the next chapter looks in depth at the power of personal confidence. Confidence breeds competence.