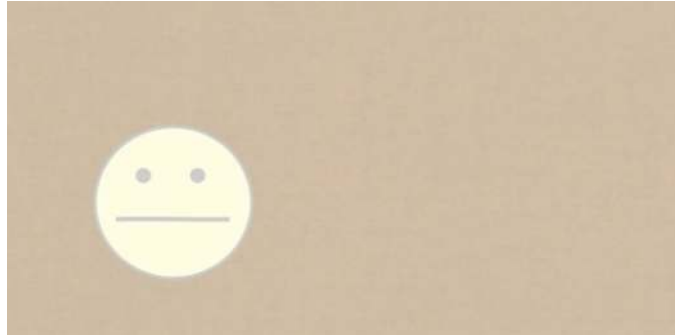




FACILITATOR NEUTRALITY – NOT JUST A STUDY IN BEIGE

By Rhonda Sparks-Tranks
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The issue of neutrality puts many facilitators in a quandary. Just what does it mean for a facilitator to be “neutral” and neutral about what?

If you have ever been invited to a facilitated meeting supposedly seeking different perspectives, then find the outcome is predetermined you will know about the damage done. Trust is compromised and it impacts your behaviour in future meetings (if you bother to attend). It’s one matter for facilitators to maintain a neutral stance by containing their personal opinions but it’s another altogether when a client asks the facilitator to ensure a specific outcome from a meeting. It’s important that facilitators have “the neutrality discussion” with their clients and clarify expectations before launching into working with the group.

Nowadays my clients generally understand the facilitator’s role and one reason they contract a professional facilitator is because they seek impartiality. But sometimes our role is misunderstood. I have been asked to “facilitate” a meeting to ensure a specific outcome is achieved. I needed to explain how engaging a facilitator to drive through a decision could backfire spectacularly. I work to help groups reach an outcome that is genuinely up for exploration. If the client has a different agenda then ethically I’m obliged to decline the assignment.

Mostly I work within organisations and am contracted by a leader or leadership group. Wise leaders understand the best way to demonstrate the value of working collaboratively is to model it. Contracting an independent “neutral” facilitator gives leaders the freedom to engage in the “what” of a meeting rather than how it is done. The leader is also freed-up from the burden of managing the process and the dynamic and can concentrate on the content as a participant - interacting and engaging in dialogue with the others in the room.

Just what does it mean for a facilitator to be neutral? I once got myself into trouble when someone took exception to my intervention regarding unhelpful behaviours in the group “You told us you were neutral” he interjected “but by asking me to let others have their say you are not being completely neutral – you are favouring them”. I had in fact introduced myself as being “substantively neutral” a term borrowed from Roger Schwarz (The Skilled Facilitator, 2002) but I’d failed to explain what I meant by that term. From this man’s perspective neutral meant completely hands-off. Neutral is not a neutral word.

Over the years I’ve become more conscious of why I am doing what I am doing as a facilitator. I sort of drifted into group facilitation and initially didn’t have a framework that informed my practice. In my early days – back in the 80’s and 90’s, I undoubtedly got involved in content and influenced outcomes without being aware how this tainted the legitimacy of my role. By the time I joined the International Association of Facilitators in 2006 I

understood the importance of impartiality – and I’d become increasingly conscious of how challenging this can be. The concept is enshrined in the preamble to the IAF’s Code of Ethics which states “Facilitators are called upon to fill an impartial role in helping groups become more effective.” As an IAF Certified Professional Facilitator I’m required to model the core competencies including F.3.c “Is vigilant to minimize influence on group outcomes”.

It’s the vigilance that I’m interested in because realistically, complete neutrality is impossible. Our reactions and responses “leak” from our facial expressions, body language, speech, voice and movement - regardless of how hard we try to maintain an impartial stance.

In writing this article I’ve found myself tied up in knots with language and meaning related to neutrality, objectivity and impartiality. They are not easy concepts and I’ve found myself reflecting on my own shortcomings – how, when, with whom might I have been less than impartial? As facilitators we need to strive towards being as objective as possible. This means being aware of own biases - but most of them are unconscious, so how can we be aware of our unconscious biases? It is so easy even unintentionally, to abuse the “power of the marker” or the power of being up the front of the room. This is why I now rarely scribe myself and why I often physically get out of the way during discussions. Bias can be very subtle for example, with whom do we make eye contact for the next comment.

I’m not an absolute purist. If I box myself into a position of absolute neutrality it would stifle my flexibility - and this is crucial to properly doing the job. By occasionally opening up a new line of thinking I may help the group move beyond being stuck or imprisoned by group-think. I do this by asking a question such as “what would stakeholder X say if they were in the room right now?” If and when tempted to step into content facilitators need to be mindful of their motive. It helps to check oneself and honestly ask “am I doing this to serve the group or to feed my own ego - or is it because I too am stuck and can’t think of an appropriate process to use right now to help the group”.

And speaking of process – that is where I am not neutral. As a professional facilitator that’s a key area of my expertise: knowing of a range of tools and methods, why they work and how, and when to appropriately apply them in the right situation.

In summary, developing a shared understanding with clients and groups of what is meant by facilitator impartiality and an agreement about what happens when the boundaries are blurred will serve everyone well.

The ultimate test of whether the facilitator was “vigilant to minimize influence on group outcomes” is the experience of the meeting participants and client. Did they think / feel the facilitator worked with them on an issue that was genuinely up for exploration? Did everyone have the opportunity to express ideas? Did the facilitator intervene fairly on matters of process? Did the facilitator guide the group to their own outcome using appropriate methods and processes?

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