



## FACILITATORS – BEFORE YOU “GO SHOPPING” FOR TOOLS

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First published November 2017



I was in one of those mega hardware stores (Bunnings) shopping for equipment to paint the fence and gates at the office. Never having painted a metal fence before I really didn't have a clue what I needed. I picked up stuff from the shelves, read labels and eventually made a choice. Loaded up with all manner of things including expensive paintbrushes I headed for the checkout. For some reason - perhaps a nagging feeling I didn't know what I was doing - I sought the advice of a store assistant.

"Are these the best brushes? What other tools do I need?" "Well it depends" he said, "tell me what you are trying to do."

It became apparent that I really didn't understand the task, nor did I have enough basic knowledge to help me make the right choice. I was thankful for his advice because I saved money and time. He told me that for my purpose cheaper brushes would serve just as well and gave advice on what else I needed to do and buy to produce the outcome I needed. Then I went on-line and did more research on painting metal fences and I learned there was much more to the job than slapping on expensive paint.

So what has this got to do with facilitation?

Whether you're a cook, a podiatrist, an economic forecaster or a facilitator choosing the right tool for the job is vital. Check out the tools used by carpenters and orthopaedic surgeons (yes, you can go on-line shopping for these tools). There are drills, saws and clamps. They look remarkably alike. However the knowledge base and skills needed to use a carpenter's saw as opposed to a surgeon's saw are very different. A carpenter knows a lot about wood and an orthopaedic surgeon knows a lot about bones. You might be the best carpenter in the world with a great toolkit, but I still wouldn't let you operate on my dodgy ankle.

There's much more to your profession or craft than having a fancy set of tools. However some facilitators become enamoured with methods, thinking that's all there is to performing the role. There's a temptation for rookies to focus on their tool collection rather than focusing on purpose, skills, knowledge and attitude or mind-set. Perhaps that's because tools are more tangible and so much of what we do as facilitators is intangible.

Don't get me wrong. Tools are important – very important. Try cutting a piece of 4" x 2" with a nail file instead of a whiz-bang electric saw. An excellent tool doesn't make someone a carpenter. However quality tools make all the difference to a well-trained carpenter who knows how to use them appropriately. Try reaching a consensus decision from 7 choices in a free-form discussion versus using structured decision-making tools. Good tools are essential to help groups reach robust and sustainable outcomes in a timely fashion.

This issue of choosing tools often comes up on facilitation forums when people seek suggestions for an activity or method without giving the context. It also comes up when I'm training and mentoring facilitators when I'm asked about the best method to use for their situation. My response is always to ask the person what are they trying to achieve (just as the store assistant in Bunnings asked me). Clarity on purpose and required outcomes is paramount.

Less experienced facilitators often develop a dependence on particular tools and methodologies - "if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail". Using the wrong tool for the job is not only ineffective, it can actually cause damage. A case in point is the frequent misuse of dot-voting / dotmocracy as a prioritising tool resulting in poor decisions.

Go back to source and learn about the tools you use as a facilitator. One of the most powerful tools for working with change is a Force Field Analysis. There's a lot out there on the web about FFA and much of it is misinformed, which again leads to invalid results. Go back to source. Who developed it; how and why does it work?



You can pile up your facilitator shopping trolley with tools but that won't make you an effective facilitator. You need to have a collection of the right tools for the specific task and know how to use them properly in conjunction with all the other skills and knowledge needed to facilitate.

When Stephen Covey wrote about "Sharpening the Saw" as Habit #7 of Highly Effective People, he wasn't talking about a physical saw but about preserving and developing the greatest asset you have - yourself. How you show up as a facilitator is more than turning up with a shopping cart of tools. To be an effective facilitator you also need to know why, how and when to use methods and combine this with ever developing skills, knowledge and self awareness.

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Rhonda has decades of experience as a trainer, coach and facilitator working with major corporations and organisations around the world. Her facilitation focus is usually: navigating organisational change after restructures, strategic direction setting and planning, and team development - particularly when work relationships have become dysfunctional.



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