



## MY FACILITATION LIGHTBULB MOMENT

By Rhonda Sparks  
First published 2015



It was so long ago my hair didn't have one strand of grey, but I remember that moment as if it was yesterday.

I was working as the Training Manager in a large organisation. I already had extensive experience working in intensive experiential learning situations and was gaining confidence in being able to manage difficult group situations. The big boss asked me to run a residential planning retreat for a branch within the organisation. This branch was not functioning well and animosity between management and the union was growing. Problems were escalating and my brief included exploring some of these problems with the whole group. If I recall about 20-25 staff attended the residential retreat.

Things started off OK. As agreed, senior management opened the event and gave short presentations on future directions then left. I moved everyone into small groups to discuss the issues raised. In the plenary discussion the spokesman for one group (the union representative - let's call him Steve) took the opportunity to wrest control by criticising management and suggesting an alternate purpose and agenda for the retreat. He then asked for a show of hands on who supported his proposed agenda.

Things quickly started to unravel. When middle managers attempted to speak Steve accused them of railroading staff. When I suggested we were here for a different purpose and a different type of meeting Steve then proposed a motion of no confidence in me as the facilitator. A few others joined him. However most people (including the middle managers in attendance) seemed afraid of Steve and his tactics.

In the end I played the role of a discussion moderator and (unqualified) mediator. We didn't address most of the issues on the agenda and certainly didn't get to do much planning on Day 2. Steve ended up alienating himself from all but a few of his diehard supporters.

It was awful. I was out of my depth, but I somehow I survived and lived to tell the tale.

When I got home and after I recovered I looked up the old Pfeiffer and Jones handbooks for Group Facilitators. That was my aha / lightbulb moment. I read something and realised that my role wasn't to be chair of a procedural type of meeting where Robert's / Renton's Rules could be utilised. I wasn't supposed to be a discussion moderator or a trainer or a mediator or even a therapist. I was supposed to be there as a Process Facilitator. To design and manage processes so the group could work through the content issues themselves.

I realised that my meeting design wasn't structured with the appropriate processes to manage the dynamic that emerged. That was when I first came across the term Process Facilitator. Ever since I have been interested in this special leadership role that works on a premise of collaboration rather than the adversarial approaches so common in many meeting situations.

This all happened way before the International Association of Facilitators was formed. I started to train others in meeting / process facilitation in 1994, using my own experience and limited readings and resources. I placed emphasis on understanding one's role as a facilitator – knowing how it differs from e.g. a chair or trainer or mediator and what elements of the roles are similar. This is still a core tenet of my facilitator training and mentoring today.



*Another lightbulb / aha moment at an IAF Victoria Chapter professional development event – February 2015*

If only .... way back then ... I had access to the body of knowledge, core competencies, professional development, community and support I found and joined the IAF in 2006. I wonder how I would have handled that situation with Steve? What would you have done? What would I do now?

### Rhonda Sparks-Tranks

B.A. Certified Professional Facilitator, Master

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.



**RHONDA SPARKS**  
facilitator | coach | celebrant

*illuminating pathways for change*

e [rhonda@illumiconsulting.com.au](mailto:rhonda@illumiconsulting.com.au) t +61 (0) 410 510 720 w [www.illumiconsulting.com.au](http://www.illumiconsulting.com.au)