

Advanced facilitation

“Working with my friend Jeremy Clare, a personal counsellor and consultant, we evolved an innovative approach to personal development and decision making. We called this approach ‘advanced facilitation’. It required us to listen to our clients thinking and mental strategies for working through their issues. Our job then was to support them to follow their own thinking.”

Mike O’Sullivan

What is advanced facilitation?

Advanced facilitation is difficult to describe in terms of skills and techniques. Rather, it is place Jeremy and I learnt to take outside of the traditional roles of teacher, trainer, coach, mentor or facilitator. It is where higher-level principles guide our actions; and our experience and skills are the supporting cast.

Let me start with a simple description of each of the traditional roles:

- **Teacher** - the role is primarily imparting information relevant to a specific subject, and is usually one way - e.g. history teacher.
- **Trainer** - this role is similar to the teacher in as much as it gives information, in addition it provides models and practical exercises to develop new practice - e.g. management trainer.
- **Coach** - this role observes the learner practicing a new skill and offers advice and guidance on how to develop the new skill - e.g. tennis or golf coach.

- **Mentor** - this role solicits and shares the mentor's experience and expertise with a mentee - e.g. business mentor.
- **Facilitator** - this role usually manages the process of a group whilst the members focus on the content and context.

What makes advanced facilitation different to the traditional roles?

Whereas the traditional roles focus on content, context, process, and expertise, the advanced facilitator's primary focus is assisting the individual or group to understand and manage their own internal processes and strategies.

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There are times when working in advanced facilitator mode, you might find it helpful to take one of the traditional roles for a while. If you do, then it is important to announce which role you are taking and for how long.

This is solely to assist an individual or group to overcome a blockage or void in their ability to think and express themselves; and to enable you to return to your primary role of observing and feeding back the internal processes and strategies of the individual or group.

How does it work?

Our primary task is to ask questions that assist the individual or group to explore and express their internal processes. For example:

- **In a session with an individual**, they may deny that their lack of confidence or feeling of worthlessness is due to misguided information subsumed in their early years. They continue to believe in their parent's good parenting and they trust them implicitly. Consequently, their decisions in adult life are based on what they were told and how they were judged. Their internalised beliefs and judgements form the rationale for their 'internal process' which controls their decisions and responses to situations today.
- **In a couples relationship situation**, one partner may blame the other for the problems in their relationship and take no responsibility for their part in its breakdown. The challenge, once again, is the beliefs and judgements they hold as being the truth of their situation. Questions would explore and acknowledge how their 'internal process' contributes to the dysfunctional relation.
- **In a group situation**, it could be that one member may dominate the group and doesn't appreciate the impact they have on the other members and the consequential impact that has on the functioning of the group. At the same time, the other members of the group are not challenging the dysfunctionality of the group process. It is the role of the advance facilitator to observe and feedback the group's internal process, so they can grapple with how they might change the way they work together to achieve a better outcome.

What is the 'internal process'?

The 'internal process' is made up of beliefs and judgements which enable us to make important decisions for ourselves, in our relationships and in life in general. They are learnt and internalised

in our early years development and silently and continually control our adult decisions and responses.

The focus of the advanced facilitator's questions is to bring out the internal process. Once out and in front of the individual or group they can then become more objective about how to work through situations leading to new decisions which are not misinformed by past beliefs and 'scales of judgement'.

What are 'scales of judgement'?

In our early years we learn what is important by how we are judged. For example:

If we answer back to our parents, we may be judged as rude or being disrespectful. On the other hand, we may be judged as standing up for ourselves or being self-respectful. It is this continuum of judgements from 'disrespectful' to 'self-respectful' that I refer to as the 'scale of judgement'. Depending on how strongly we were judged is where we will be on that scale. From the moment we learn our scale of judgement, we use it in situations to make decisions about ourselves or others.

These early judgements affect our autonomy and authenticity too. Using the example above the child who was judged to be 'self-respectful' when answering back is most likely to retain their autonomy. Whereas a child who is judged nearer the 'disrespectful' end of the continuum will have their autonomy limited by this judgement.

Scales of judgement determine what is important to us and therefore will influence our decisions in the future.

As part of our personal growth and development, we have accumulated an abundance of situations where we have internalised 'scales of judgement', for example:

- What do you consider to be rude?
- What do you think about climate change?
- How do you define unfaithfulness?
- How much do you trust strangers?
- How do you react when you feel disrespected?
- What makes you feel happy and stimulated?
- What are your beliefs on monogamy?
- How important is your autonomy?

For each of the above and many, many more, we have internalised a scale of judgement to help us make decisions in every part of our life. If you agree, then revealing and reviewing your scale of judgement can lead to new decisions with the potential of better outcomes in your life.

What is the Goal of Advanced Facilitation?

The goal of advanced facilitation is the freeing up and letting go of decisions and judgements which have in the past limited our potential in certain situations.

If we are to make progress, we must identify the scales of judgment operating in us and on us, and choose not to be controlled by, influenced by, affected by or impressed by them. We make progress situation by situation, each with its past associated decisions and judgments.

Once the scales of judgement are revealed and talked about, the critical question to ask is:

‘What decision would you make in this situation if you did not have that scale of judgement?’

As a result, the individual or group make a completely new decision not limited by their scales of judgement; and they feel liberated by the level of autonomy and authenticity they have achieved in the situation.

Guiding principles for the advanced facilitator?

As an aspiring advanced facilitator, we need to think about how we move to that place, rather than develop another ‘go-faster’ stripe. To assist us make that movement, there are some guiding principles for you to contemplate.

1. We need to let go of concerning ourselves with ourselves

The guiding principle is:

“If you work to be *liked* (or whatever), then you will not achieve your purpose, unless it is your purpose”

So often, we are guided in our work to impress our delegates/clients or at least to be liked by them. The effect is our purpose and behaviour is affected by how we are perceived and not on what our delegates/clients wish to achieve.

As an advanced facilitator your reward is not the attainment of fame or glory, nor compliments or praise. Rather it is the growth in your own ‘self-actualising’ and the knowledge that you have helped others to ‘self-actualise’ as well.

Note:

'Self-actualising' is a term used to describe the regaining of our autonomy and authenticity. Further reading on 'self-actualisation' can be found in *Motivation and Personality* by Abraham Maslow, 1997.

2. We need to let go of concerning ourselves with finding solutions

The guiding principle is:

“Solutions have a way of revealing themselves”.

This principle frees up people to be more creative, to explore more their own boundaries and to think for themselves without the pressure and focus of 'having to have a solution'. It also takes away their expectation that we will either show them a way out or give them the answer.

It frees us up too, the advanced facilitator, to trust the individual or group that they have the capability to find their own solution and for us to support them wherever it takes them.

3. We need to let go of taking responsibility

The guiding principle is:

“You limit someone's growth (journey of self-discovery/ reclamation) to the extent to which you (or others) take responsibility for them”.

This is a key principle of advanced facilitation that does not take responsibility away from the participant, as found in the roles of teacher, coach, mentor and facilitator.

Letting go of responsibility is our issue not the individual or group's. But, they do need to step up and take responsibility for their own internal process. In the beginning, this is not their expectation of us, the advanced facilitator. We, therefore, have to spend time at the beginning transferring responsibility for their process from us to them.

4. They need to take responsibility for their situation

The guiding principle is:

“Where you are (delegate/clients) is where you have chosen to be”

This principle supports the previous guiding principle because it is the principle that contradicts what so many people believe about themselves and their situation. It is the principle that places responsibility on their shoulders and not anyone else's.

So often people want to blame, or at least hold responsible, someone or something outside of themselves for their situation. In so doing they are giving control of their situation to someone or something else. They have given up their ability to change the situation to someone or something else by not taking responsibility for their part in it.

This principle confronts their internal process and makes them aware that they can only change their situation if they take responsibility for the decisions and judgements they made that led to their situation.

5. Our emotions display how we have been judged

The guiding principle is:

“Our emotions display how we have been judged by others, they are not who we are”

Emotional speak (speaking whilst emotional) is inherently judgemental. Its language is rooted in judgements that were emotionally burnt into our memory and therefore automatically influence what we say and how we react.

Non-emotional speak (speaking with an awareness of emotions and not controlled by them) is inherently descriptive. Its language is rooted in descriptions of what we are feeling/felt, saying/said or doing/done.

When the advanced facilitator assists people to be aware of the judgements that underpin their emotional speak, then they are on the road to reclaiming their authenticity. Remember, our emotions display how we have been judged by others, they are not who we are.

6. Our job is to help them find their own solution

The guiding principle is:

“If you assume people are capable of finding their own solutions, then they will find it”

When we keep to asking questions, we assist an individual or group to discover their own internal process. Only then are they capable of making new decisions and finding the best solution for their situation.

When we stop asking questions and speak from our own agenda then we have shifted to one of the traditional roles. The focus has shifted from their agenda to ours.

This is the mistake many professionals make because of their experience and expertise. They assume they know what their delegates/client need and all they have to do is give them a solution. The more helpful assumption is 'they are capable of finding their own solution' and 'our job is to help them find it'.

7. We must be role models of self-discovery and self-actualisation

The guiding principle is:

“People move as far as it is safe for you the advanced facilitator to move!”

When listening to someone telling their story, there may be times when we feel uncomfortable or think it is too risky for us. And if that is the case, we might find a way to end the session. It is important that we recognise that it is our situation that has limited the person's journey of self-discovery.

Having our own experience of the journey of self-discovery, teaches us that it is not as risky as we have been led to believe and our trust in the process will enable us to encourage and support them on their journey of discovery.

Putting it another way: If we want to assist another on a journey of self-discovery and self actualisation, and in order to be their role

model, we must have at least travelled our own journey of self-discover and self-actualisation.

9. In summary

Advanced facilitation is...

- A place outside of the traditional roles of teacher, trainer, coach, mentor and facilitator.
- How we use higher-level principles to guide our words and actions, with our experience and skills being the supporting cast.
- Having a goal of self-actualisation for ourselves and the people we are privileged to work with.
- Assisting an individual or group to take responsibility for their own internal process leading to new decisions will enable them to rise above out-dated beliefs and scales of judgement.

Advanced facilitation is not...

- Limiting someone's growth by taking responsibility for them
- Speaking from our agenda and not listening to theirs
- Sympathising or giving excuses which collude with their outdated decisions and judgements
- Working to be liked or praised instead of our real purpose
- A performance - it is not ever about us, always about them.

If you want to learn a new skill or new technique, then advanced facilitation is not the place for you!