

## **"Listening for Aliveness":**

### **Experimenting with the re-design of our conversational systems**

What might it mean, to listen in a way that something comes alive? We read everywhere that listening deeply and well is crucial to constructive conversation, and substantial part of the work that we do as facilitators and coaches is to listen to others. Yet how can we talk about listening, in a way that does not put everyone to sleep? Most of us have been exhorted to listen, listen, listen better, for most of our lives (at least since we first started kindergarten!) It may be time to apply Deming's key insight that there may be nothing wrong with the people in any given system: instead, it may be the system itself that needs to change...

By "system", I mean here some of our basic assumptions about meetings, about the nature of dialogue, and about facilitation. These assumptions structure the conversational systems in which we all live, shaping the specifics of the conventional time and space arrangements that organize our interactions. If we wish to obtain different results, our assumptions might bear some fruitful re-examining. Here are some of the assumptions I will be inviting us to question:

- 1) Productive task meetings depend on leaving personal emotions 'at the door';
- 2) Good group process always involves participants talking directly with one another;
- 3) We need to get agreement on problem definition before listening to solutions;
- 4) Part of a facilitator's role is helping "move" a group toward agreement.

My main purpose in questioning these assumptions, is to invite readers to consider what it could mean for a facilitator to listen 'in a different way', and how that might influence participants to listen 'in a different way' as well. I will be showing how, as facilitators, we do not necessarily need to exhort participants to "listen to one another", nor indeed explicitly "teach" them how to do so. Instead, we can offer a different approach, one where "attitudes are caught instead of taught," as the facilitator, too, is engaging in a different manner than the one to which we may be accustomed.

Furthermore, I will be exploring the connection between conversational systems that allow us to "listen for aliveness", and the need to develop greater experiential trust regarding the potential of self-organizing dynamics to lead to spontaneous convergences.

There is a growing understanding in our field that a self-organizing, dialogical process of discovery can lead to a host of benefits, including greater creativity, commitment, motivation, and follow-through (Senge, 1990.) Yet generally speaking, dialogical processes are still seen as primarily applicable for increased interpersonal understanding. The term "task-oriented dialogue" is widely regarded as oxymoronic; when faced with a need for practical outcomes, the tendency is to default to linear processes that attempt to "manage" convergence. We will be exploring how linear processes that attempt to 'manage convergence' or 'negotiate agreement' significantly restrict on our ability as facilitators to consistently remain in a listening stance that deeply welcomes difference.

Our questioning of the four assumptions listed above will be carried out primarily by means of contrast: I will be offering facilitator narratives to illustrate a specific method of group facilitation that operates from a contrasting set of assumptions. Dynamic Facilitation, originally developed by consultant Jim Rough, was designed to help groups engage in creative and productive dialogue on practical issues (Atlee, 2012, 2003; Rough, 2002; Zubizarreta, 2013, 2006).

A detailed "how-to" manual of Dynamic Facilitation is available elsewhere (Zubizarreta, 2014). In this paper, I will be offering instead a "feel" of how this method works in practice, while exploring some of its underlying principles. The facilitator narratives I will use for this purpose are all drawn from an earlier qualitative research study (Zubizarreta 2002).<sup>1</sup> Many of the section headers are the "themes" that emerged in a qualitative analysis of the interviews.

As a complement to our own or others' practice, mental models can also be useful for helping to understand and organize experience. In the famous words of Kurt Lewin, "there is nothing as practical as a good theory". Thus, in addition to the facilitator narratives, I will also be drawing upon some writings in dialogue theory that can shed further light on the notion of "listening for aliveness."

### **What it might mean to 'really listen'...**

I will begin with Maureen Richards, a professional facilitator for 20 years, speaking about what she loves most about her work with Dynamic Facilitation:

“When I stand up in front of a room, if people have not seen me before, I know that they will expect traditional facilitation. I know that what I will do is to really, really hear everyone in the room, but they don’t know that yet... Even in focus groups that are highly structured, “tell me more!” works like magic. The look on people’s faces when I say that, *and they realize I mean it*, is a joy.” (emphasis in the original).

When asked how she sees her purpose as a facilitator, Maureen replies:

“My purpose is to hear people. To *really* hear people. Knowing that the first statement that they say is usually not what it’s totally about. Often it’s just a knock on the door. My purpose is to open the door...”

From a relational perspective, communication is not the simple "delivery of a message"; instead, a supportive and interested listening context can be crucial for helping the speaker 'unfold' and fine-tune their meaning in a process of creative discovery.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to facilitation methodologies where concerns tend to center on how to 'manage' excessive participation, practitioners using the Dynamic Facilitation method work hard to "draw people out." In this approach, "Tell me more..." is not just a sincere statement: it is also a key intervention.

Yet "tell me more" is not something that can work well in isolation. Anyone familiar with the practice of facilitation could easily think of any number of constraints that could make it difficult for a facilitator to say, "tell me more". For instance, time is often a familiar constraint. Yet time is also aspect of the design of our conversation. For example, if the design of our facilitation process requires us to "complete" one topic before we move on to the next, this may place a systemic constraint on the ability of the facilitator to "really listen" to a remark that is considered "off topic".

Similarly, what happens if we are following a "waterfall" process of problem-solving that requires us to get agreement on the problem definition, and then get agreement on desired solution criteria, before we are allowed to listen to anyone's solutions? Clearly, this will limit our ability to listen to a participant who is proposing a solution at a moment that is "inappropriate" as defined by our process. In like manner, if we believe that good

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed for confidentiality.

<sup>2</sup> This way of understanding human communication is also found in the field of experiential psychotherapy (eg, Gendlin, 1996).

outcomes depend on the facilitator's "orchestrating" the group's movement toward convergence, this is likely to place constraints on how fully we can welcome a divergent contribution, at least during what we see as the 'convergence' phase the process.

So we see that our ability as facilitators to say "tell me more" and really mean it, is shaped and constrained by the assumptions of the conversational system within which we are operating. In order to "really listen", even as facilitators, we need approaches that are optimally designed to support the listening process. What might such an approach look like, and how would it work in practice?

### **Welcoming emotions and helping participants feel heard**

Ben Woods, another practitioner of Dynamic Facilitation, is part of the U.S. Navy, and works at a naval shipyard in Washington State. His facilitation assignments have included process improvement, change management, and teamwork development. He comments:

“One of the things that we as facilitators bring to meetings is our ability to empathize. If someone is speaking out about an issue, and they are repeating their point, it is an indication that they aren't feeling heard. We can help them feel recognized and understood.”

Popular literature on facilitation is often filled with darkly humorous typologies of "difficult meeting participants". Within such approaches, this participant might find themselves identified as a "difficult person." In contrast, Ben is viewing repetition as a likely indicator that a participant is not feeling heard, and a signal that more work needs to be done on the part of the facilitator.

In some situations, 'not feeling heard' may simply be a result of not having one's contribution reflected back accurately and respectfully. Just because someone has 'spoken', does not necessarily imply that the person has experienced their intended message as being received. In such circumstances, it may be a fairly simple matter to help the participant "feel recognized and understood." The participant may simply need to hear his or her perspective reflected back, in an accurate and caring manner, by the facilitator.

This kind of "active listening" is familiar to most of us as part of "basic listening skills 101," although it is rarely sufficiently understood and valued. In part, this may be due to the fact the effectiveness of 'active listening' depends so strongly upon the intention of the user. For example, if someone is "reflecting my words back to me," simply as an attempt to get me to "move along", the technique will not cover up the underlying experience of disregard or manipulation. Instead, the underlying unpleasantness of the situation will be transferred onto my experience of the technique, thus creating an "allergy" to hearing my words reflected back to me.

Yet even when we have reflected back a participant's contribution, with both accuracy as well as respectful empathy, there may be other reasons why a meeting participant is not feeling heard, and is thus repeating themselves. For instance, it may be the case that there is a 'more' underneath their initial statement, as Maureen Richards pointed to in an earlier quote: "the first statement that they say is usually not what it's totally about. Often it's just a knock on the door..." If the facilitator has not received all of the participant's intended meaning, simply "echoing back the words" will not work very well.

This is especially the case whenever the facilitator has not really understood what the participant intended. In order to help people feel heard, the facilitator needs to assume that there is some way in which the participant's statement makes complete sense to them, from within their own point of view. The facilitator's task is to discover and understand the context in which the participants' utterance has meaning.<sup>3</sup> In this kind of situation, "tell me more" is only a starting point designed to enable the facilitator to eventually reach an understanding of what the participant means, from the participant's own perspective. It is only when the facilitator is able to empathize with, and accurately reflect the underlying meaning, that the participant will be able to feel genuinely "recognized and understood."

Ben Woods goes on to describe how approaches to emotions can vary among different schools of facilitation:

“I’ve been to three other training sessions on facilitation. One was good, two were marginal, in part because the approach they took was that the facilitator’s role is to

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<sup>3</sup> As mentioned earlier, this perspective has strong parallels with experiential psychotherapy (Gendlin, 1996).

SEPARATE people's emotions from the issue. Yes, it's true that emotions can cause problems, but you can't separate people from their emotions. Instead, you need to face the emotions directly: "I see you're really excited (or mad). Can you tell me why?"

"It's only when you address these things that people are then able to set the emotions aside on their own. You can tell people to set their emotions aside, but if you shut them down, then they often won't say anything else for the rest of the meeting. Yet that person may have a key element to solving the problem at hand, and you've just lost their participation in the effort."

### **Welcoming and protecting participant's creativity**

In addition to welcoming emotions, Ben emphasizes the importance of protecting the initial stirrings of each participant's creative process:

"People are not used to encouraging and embracing ideas, from the perspective of 'where is the gem here?' Instead, if a facilitator is not present, what usually happens is that the creative ideas will never be identified, or worse, will be squelched."

"*Where is the gem here?*" could be described as the attitude of the facilitator toward something he or she does not understand. The 'gem' can be understood as the meaning that a statement holds for a participant, even if not at first discernible to others.

At the same time, there is a further way to understand this question. Beyond the meaning that a participant's contribution has to him or herself, there is also the value of that contribution to the larger process. For instance, if we look at the process of innovation, we see that every successful creation builds upon a history of earlier experiments, each of which contributes a crucial piece of understanding to the final 'successful outcome'. Regardless of whether a particular individual's creative contribution ends up being "the answer" or not, there is always some way in which that contribution can serve as a step in the larger process of building shared understanding.

For example, a participant's contribution may be helping for clarify the question, by surfacing a misunderstanding. Or, it may be introducing a useful feature that will end up

being incorporated into the final design, even if the final design is quite different from the current solution being proposed. These are only two of the many ways in which a participant's contribution may be of value.

Yet to discover the potential gift that each person has to offer, that person must first be "received", offered a safe space within which to unfurl the tentative shape and form of their perceptions, concerns, and ideas. While others' concerns are also welcome in the process, it is important to allow enough space for each contribution to be fully heard, rather than allowing other participants to step in too quickly. "Protecting", or creating a "sheltered space" for each participant to connect with their own unfolding thinking process, is a key intervention in this approach.

Another key aspect of how creativity is encouraged in Dynamic Facilitation, is the open invitation to partake in an agile or non-linear process that oscillates freely between the problem-space and the solution-space. This allows facilitators to welcome "initial solutions" as a way of appreciatively "downloading" participant's best creative work to date (limited as it might be by its initially siloed perspective.) It also allows facilitators to continue welcoming solutions at any point during the process, as a form of "rapid prototyping". (For more on this particular aspect of Dynamic Facilitation, see Zubizarreta, 2013.)

### **Working with conflict**

Actively "protecting" the contribution of each participant is crucial not only for encouraging creativity and supporting the learning process; it also critical when it comes to highly conflictual situations. The following anecdote by Maureen Richards illustrates many of these elements in action, in the context of a challenging public participation process.

Maureen was hired by her local public library system to facilitate public input with regard to the contentious issue of whether to place internet access filters on the library's computers. Each meeting was held in a different county, with a different set of participants. Maureen described the difficulties she encountered at the first meeting she facilitated:

“...I was SO exhausted by the time this work was done. There were people with bibles, people concerned about pornography, and people with concerns about the first amendment...when I first said, “how do you want to go about doing this?” every hand went up, and everyone started talking at once [...] finally after about 40 minutes, people SAW what was happening, they SAW that there was order in the chaos. They saw that solutions were actually coming out, that they WERE there, and it was no longer just yelling and screaming. Yet the first forty minutes were overwhelming. It was overwhelming attempting to protect all of the participants, as there was so much animosity that protection was exhausting. At the end, we had 5 pages of solutions [...] the library staff had never seen anything like this before. They had never seen people be so calm at the conclusion of a meeting.”

As a result of her first experience, Maureen decided she needed to modify her technique slightly for the next two events:

“By the second meeting, I had figured out that I needed to introduce the process more than I usually do when I’m working with other groups. So I told them at the beginning what I was going to do. I said, “I want to hear from every one of you. Whoever is talking, I will stick with that person for a while, because I want to hear them completely.” Only then did I ask the group, “How should we do this? How do you want to choose whose turn it is?” They came up with a number of different ways, and then they chose to raise their hands. So I explained to them that my rule was, “I will protect the person who is talking.” If someone started to interrupt, I would walk right between the two people and continue listening to the first person. As a result, the second and third meeting were much easier. It was a different approach for me, to tell them what I was going to do ahead of time.”<sup>4</sup>

Maureen goes on to describe the response to her work by the library staff who had hired her:

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<sup>4</sup> As originally formulated by Jim Rough, one of the early characteristics of Dynamic Facilitation was its disavowal of the need for any "ground rules" (Rough, 2002). Instead, Jim usually began a facilitated session in a business context by simply asking the group, “What do you all want to talk about?” In this case, Maureen discovered that she needed to modify Jim's original approach to be more effective within a public participation context. Still, her introduction is less a set of "rules" for participants, than a simple description of her own role: to listen well to each person. The only "rule" is a very natural consequence: 'in order to listen well, I can only hear one person at a time, so you will need to somehow take turns'.

“By the time I was done, the library people were completely flabbergasted that we had come up with so many solutions [...] The library’s bottom line was to get solutions. But they ended up with more than they had asked for, because they also ended up with customers that felt heard.”

Maureen mentioned earlier that the "library staff had never seen people be so calm at the end of a meeting." From Deming's perspective, we might realize that it was not the people themselves who had changed: it was a change in the system -- in this case, the system of communication -- that was evoking a different kind of behavior from the participants.

We have seen in this example how a facilitator does not need to exhort participants to "listen to one another", nor indeed explicitly "teach" them how to do so. Instead, he or she is instead offering a different conversational system: one where the facilitator acts as a "designated listener," and ensures that each participant will get a full hearing, by inviting them to speak directly to her. This allows her to take the time to draw out each participant, reflecting back their meaning with care and accuracy. In turn, this provides the rest of the group a high-quality opportunity to "overhear" one another in depth, thus catalyzing a shift toward a different tone in the conversation. This design, sometimes termed "third-party listening", is a key structural feature of Dynamic Facilitation, and can be especially useful in high-conflict situations.

Once greater understanding has developed among participants, the facilitator can 'fade into the woodwork'. The participants are then speaking to one another directly, as in conventional approaches to dialogue. Still, in Dynamic Facilitation, the facilitator remains alert for situations where conflicting perspectives require the creation of 'more space'. As needed, he or she will step back in to reflect back each of the conflicting perspectives, and will then invite the rest of the group to add any additional perspectives. In this way, conflict does not degrade into polarization and emotional wounding. Instead, the difference of perspectives shifts into what Peter Senge (1990) calls "creative tension," a powerful engine of transformation.

## **Relationship as the context of dialogue**

The kind of listening we have been describing above is not without its costs, as we saw in

Maureen Richard's description of the exhausting nature of her work. Other facilitators echoed this experience as well. Paul Fanit, a consultant in Edmonton, Canada, conducts program evaluations, policy reviews, and policy analysis, and has worked widely with non-profits and community development. He comments on the exhausting nature of good facilitation:

“One of the things that’s critical is that if you allow your thinking ahead to distract you from genuinely listening, then you are in trouble. Facilitating can look easy, but it is an incredibly exhausting thing. Ten minutes after it is over, I am a wreck!”

At the same time, facilitators find that their efforts to 'really listen' bear fruit. Paul comments:

“One of the most important things is that the process needs to be genuine [...] When I have worked with low-income people, I have found them to be very observant in this regard. They will come up to some people and say, “I can look into your eyes and tell that you are not really sincere.” They will come up to others and give them a hug, and say, “your questions showed that you really understood.”

In this quote, Paul points to the effect of genuine listening on relationships. While he is speaking about his experience with public participation projects involving low-income people, the importance of authentic relationship is applicable in any facilitation context.

Within literature on dialogue, the theme of relationship is particularly evident in the work of Nicholas Burbules (1993), a critical theorist in education who writes with passion about dialogue. Inspired by Nel Noddings (1984) and Paulo Freire (1970), Burbules views dialogue from a postmodern and feminist perspective, as an embodied relationship between persons. One key aspect of the dialogic relationship is that it needs to be nurtured:

“A successful dialogue involves a willing partnership and cooperation in the face of likely disagreements, confusions, failures, and misunderstandings. Persistence in this process requires a relation of mutual respect, trust, and concern– and part of the dialogical interchange often must relate to the establishment and maintenance of these bonds.” (1993, p.19)

In his work, Burbules explores how the deep structure of dialogue is central to the processes of language, reasoning, morality, and social organization. Yet all of this takes place “*within* the fundamentally relational quality of dialogue.” One of the key ways in which the human relationship that is central to dialogue is established and sustained, is through the intensity of our listening effort:

“We are involved with our partners in dialogue, interested in them as well as in what they have to say, to a degree that goes beyond the casual level of commitment we have in conversation generally [...] we follow what our partners in dialogue are trying to say, we think along with them, we try to imagine matters from their point of view, to a degree that we do not bother with in ordinary speech encounters. We could not, in fact, be this involved in every conversation; it would exhaust us and dissipate our best efforts (1993, p.36)

How does this apply to facilitation? Some forms of facilitation focus on offering simple structures that invite participants to listen to one another in small groups, on particular topics. However, in the Dynamic Facilitation approach, the listening work of the facilitator involves building a strong dialogic relationship with each participant. Some practitioners-in-training have described the method as being one where the facilitator engages in a "mini-fishbowl" with each person; other facilitators have described the process, especially in its initial stages, as engaging in a "bilateral conversation" with each participant.

While Dynamic Facilitation is designed in such a way that "listening well" can be our primary intervention, this does not mean that listening is 'effortless'. It does, however, mean that all of the effort that might be expended upon other interventions, is now available for a single-minded focus on listening. It also means that the facilitator is not being structurally "pulled away" from listening by feeling the need to "diagnose problem participants", "decide how and when to intervene", "manage convergence", etc. Instead, the facilitator is working within a structure that provides the freedom to direct all of his or her energy to one end and one end only: engaging fully and wholly in the highly productive (while also potentially exhausting!) work of listening.

At the same time, the facilitator's effort as a 'designated listener' creates a conversational system in which participants are able to 'overhear' one another. As a result, participants do not need to be exhorted to "be good listeners" or to "suspend their assumptions".

Instead, they are welcome to "come as they are"; the design of the conversational system allows participants to naturally experience for themselves the value of diverse perspectives, like the scaffolding that Vygotsky describes in his theory of "zones of proximal development".

What we know from experience, is that "attitudes are caught, not taught." After being immersed in this process for some time, it is quite common for participants themselves to turn and spontaneously inquire, "Could you say more about that?" when faced with an extremely divergent perspective from another participant.

### **Recap thus far**

As we have seen, facilitators who are primarily focused on listening, can be passionate about encouraging ideas, and listening to discover "where is the gem here?" They can actively seek to draw out participants, welcoming emotions, initial solutions, concerns, and diverse perspectives, in each case helping "protect" each participant's contribution.

All of these "facilitator interventions" can be understood as elements of "listening to build relationship." The relationship of understanding that the facilitator is building with each participant, becomes a template for the kind of relationship that participants begin to build with one another, as well as with the disparate perspectives they are encountering and seeking to integrate.

As in the practitioner narratives we saw above, Burbules' writing also emphasizes the need to create safety as a necessary part of 'nurturing the dialogic relationship':

“A degree of effort usually needs to be made early on, particularly when we are engaged with someone new, to create a context of feeling and commitment in which ... participants feel safe to offer up their beliefs, and the experiences or feelings that accompany them, even when they know that they may be disagreed with.” (1993, p. 37)

Burbules' insights on dialogue as an embodied, relational practice, requiring concentrated listening work, have significant implications for any form of practice in which listening plays a key role; thus, they also have a particular resonance with the very specific and

highly "active" listening role of the facilitator in the Dynamic Facilitation approach.

### **Refusing to "manage convergence:" challenges and benefits**

And now we arrive at one of the primary constraints that we as facilitators often encounter with regard to our listening practice. Many contemporary facilitation approaches designed to address practical issues and generate practical outcomes include an initial period of "divergence," where we are explicitly advised to welcome a broad variety of perspectives. Yet usually this initial phase is followed by a subsequent phase where the task is understood as "leading" the group through a series of steps designed to result in "convergence." In stark contrast, Dynamic Facilitation asks facilitators to intentionally avoid any form of 'managed convergence'. Instead, facilitators are invited to welcome divergence continually throughout the course of a session, right up until it is time to harvest the outcomes – which could well include a summary of the main divergences still present at that point in time.

In some ways, the stance of Dynamic Facilitation is similar to the basic paradigm of Transformative Mediation (Bush and Folger, 1994), another approach that also refuses on principle to 'manage convergence.' While spontaneous convergences are welcome in Dynamic Facilitation, any apparent convergences that emerge are verified only *after* the fact. If the group concurs that this was indeed a convergence has indeed occurred, it is usually the case that they are already working on the next step, and thus exploring the next level of divergence. If instead, the convergence was only apparent, the facilitator encourages the group to continue exploring the divergence. At no point does he or she shift gears and attempt to 'manage agreement' due to the apparent proximity of a point of convergence (Zubizarreta, 2014).

Of course, no principled stance is without its attendant risks. In the interviews, facilitators described both the challenges involved in 'refusing to manage convergence', as well as the powerful results that can arise when convergences emerge spontaneously.

#### *Challenge: fearing failure*

Stephen Nichols is a consultant who practices both Dynamic Facilitation and Transformative Mediation. He began his facilitation career working at United Airlines as

an internal facilitator. Here he describes some of the challenges that accompany the refusal to 'negotiate agreement':

“You have to be fearless about it. It can be scary sometimes. How will I look as a facilitator, if by the end of this meeting, they don't have what they said they wanted as an outcome? You need to trust that, if that's what they need to have, they will have it. If they really need what they say they need, you'll get it, if you get out of the way.”

Yet one of the paradoxes of refusing to manage convergence, and instead remaining fully in a "listening stance", is that this willingness to risk "failure"<sup>5</sup> can result in extremely potent spontaneous convergences. In turn, these experiences of what is possible, lead us to develop a grounded confidence in human beings' potential to co-create powerful outcomes through an effective self-organizing process.

*Benefit: developing deep trust*

This deep trust in the potential of human beings came up repeatedly in the interviews. Here is Ben Woods again, the Navy facilitator, speaking about his growing trust in the potential of ordinary people to rise to the occasion, within a context that encourages their creativity and initiative:

“I am continually amazed by the gold and diamonds that are in these groups. The first couple of times I tried this approach, I thought we got lucky. Eventually I said, this is not a matter of luck. This can happen almost every time.”

Along similar lines, Nora Delaney, a manager of organization development and training for the State of Washington, offered the following response to the question, "What do you enjoy the most about your work as a facilitator?"

“The dynamics of what happens with a group. It's always a surprise what the group comes up with in the end. I have a deep belief and trust in the collective wisdom of the group, and it is exciting to be a part of watching it unfold, and building the safety so that it *can* unfold.”

*Challenge: our own blind spots*

However, even when the facilitator holds a deep trust, based on experience, in the effectiveness of a non-directive process, he or she can still encounter major challenges to the work of listening and welcoming divergent perspectives. Nora illustrates this in the following anecdote:

“[At one particular meeting] initially there was a hook for me. My boss, and my boss’ boss, were both part of this group. So I noticed at the beginning that as conflict arose, it was difficult for me to allow it to happen. I was interfering to stop the conflict, because the conflict was unsafe for me. But once I realized that and stopped interfering, allowed the conflict to surface, the group was able to handle it. So, as a facilitator, it’s important to know where one’s own hooks are.”

Even when the facilitator's role has been re-designed into "listening to support relationship", "welcoming and embracing conflicting perspectives" and "refusing to manage convergence", these "simple" practices are by no means "easy". And our own self-awareness as facilitators, clearly plays a key role in our ability to carry out this work.

*Benefit: Awakening the generative power of aliveness*

To the degree we as facilitators can "really listen" in a way that maximizes creative tension (while also minimizing interpersonal anxiety and generating safety for participants) a group can spontaneously arrive at place where we as facilitators cease to "do", and simply becoming a witness to the powerful co-creative movement of life.

Nora Delaney, the manager of organization development for the State of Washington, describes this 'time outside of time' as "metalogue":

“The group is no longer talking about the thing, it’s as if they have become the thing -- there is an openness to exploring the many facets of that subject, there is no rush to quickly come to a decision...instead, there is almost a sense of awe about what they are discovering together.”

Once a group has experienced this sense of communion, it can lead to some very practical

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<sup>5</sup> as in, "failure to somehow 'produce' or 'ensure' convergence"

benefits. Stephen Nichols, who earlier spoke about the "fearlessness" that this approach takes, describes some of the outcomes his group was able to achieve, within an unusually brief time:

“When I finished working with the team at United Airlines, they had accomplished all of their objectives, and more. To begin with, they had re-vitalized their mission: [...] they now felt enormous energy around it, and it was theirs. Secondly, they had winnowed through the list of hundreds of things that [...] they had felt unable to prioritize, and had come up with three specific projects to put at the top of their list. The way that they chose these projects was to leverage specific successes they had had in the past, and use them to influence other teams. Thirdly, they had dealt with the issue of the turnover in the membership of the team. New people had been brought in, in a good way. And new leadership had emerged in the team.”

To arrive at this point, Stephen was not just "trusting the process" and "getting out of the way". He was also engaging in the specific behaviors we have described earlier: 'drawing out' participants in a supportive listening context, welcoming diverse perspectives, and 'protecting' individual contributions.

*Benefit: Tapping intrinsic motivation for implementation*

In response to the question, “What differences do you experience in the outcomes of processes where people are led through a series of formal steps to come to a decision, in contrast to the outcomes of processes where the decision emerges on its own?” Ben Woods replies:

“For one thing, the latter may take longer initially. People are often rushed for time, and feel they can’t afford to take an extra two or three sessions to get to the end result [...] Yet when they do, the dividend is that at the end, everyone [...] feels a much greater commitment to the outcome. They feel strongly that this IS the answer, and we will MAKE it happen. Normally, the feeling people have at the end of a meeting is ‘Yeah, ok, I won’t get in the way of the final decision.’ That is quite different from the feeling that we FOUND this great solution together, and we are going to make it happen. In the latter situation, your chances of success go way up.”

### *Challenge: Our own limiting beliefs about what is possible*

In my own experience, I have repeatedly heard 'consensus trainers' describing 'consensus' as "something that everyone can live with. You may not love it, it may not be your first choice, but it's something you can live with." Clearly, this is a very different bar (and much lower one) than what Nora and Ben are pointing to here. While come up with something that 'everyone can live with' is an honorable intention, the typical drawn-out process of "negotiating convergence" that seeks to lead us there, also inherently limits the nature of the possible outcomes.

The first step in being able to reach beyond those limits, begins with knowing that more is possible. The second step, is to give ourselves the opportunity to experience emergence-based processes, initially as participants and then as facilitators, so that we can begin to develop a sense of grounded trust based on our own experience. Clearly, if we have not personally experienced the power of an emergent, self-organizing process in a practical context, it is understandable that we may feel that a linear process of "managing convergence" is the only real alternative to chaos.

### **Dialogue and difference**

By refusing to manage convergence, we as facilitators are empowered to fully embrace difference. Many critics of dialogue and deliberation today have questioned whether true dialogue is even possible given the kinds of social power imbalances that exist between people as a result of institutionalized oppression of various sorts, including racism, classism, sexism, etc. (references needed here) In response, Burbules emphasizes that the facilitation of dialogue includes the responsibility to actively solicit a diversity of perspectives, as well as to remain open to the possibility that consensus may not be achieved in any given instance. He writes:

“The key criterion to be applied here is whether understanding or agreement is achieved in ways that allow participants a full range of opportunities to question, challenge, or demur from each other’s views. [...] It is a mistake to assume that understanding or agreement must follow from such an endeavor, and it is a mistake to assume that it must fail.” (p. 26)

Burbules recognizes various kinds of dialogue, including ones which seek "convergence" as well as others where no convergence is sought. Yet he makes the significant point that, even if we hold convergence as a valued outcome, we have to be willing to 'fail' at if we are to maintain the integrity of the dialogue process.

While "the importance of welcoming diverse perspectives" is a fundamental principle in the larger field of facilitation, feeling compelled to 'manage convergence' and thus 'avoid failure' can deeply constrain our *ability* in a given situation, to actually listen and to welcome diverse perspectives. One example of this was seen above, in the situation Nora faced with the emerging conflict between her boss and her boss' boss.

Conversely, when we work within a conversational system designed to support spontaneous convergences, this profound change of mindset supports our ability as facilitators to really listen and to welcome diverse perspectives.

As we have seen, the Dynamic Facilitation approach is explicitly designed to create a particular kind of conversational system, one that fully supports both facilitator and participants in 'welcoming diverse perspectives'. As a result, this design also allows both facilitator and participants to fully tap into the power and potential of "listening for aliveness."

### **Where to from here?**

In this paper, I have invited us to question our assumptions about how "productive task meetings" must be designed. I have done so by offering examples from the practice of Dynamic Facilitation, a method based on a countervailing set of assumptions about group process.

I began with describing how linear processes that attempt to 'manage convergence' or 'negotiate agreement' place serious restrictions on facilitators' ability to remain in a deep listening stance. In our attempts to 'manage convergence', we feel a pressure to shift away from 'welcoming divergence' to determining which contributions are likely to lead to the desired outcome, and which are now to be determined "out of bounds". This impedes our

own ability as facilitators to offer a kind of listening that deeply welcomes difference, and thus invites and supports the possibility of powerful shared outcomes.

As a society, we pay a heavy price for this. Many of the issues that require practical outcomes today are in fact quite complex ones, that benefit from participants having the opportunity to develop a larger, systemic understanding of the issue at hand. As humans, we need to bring all of ourselves to the table, including all our divergent perspectives, in a constructive yet creative manner. For this to happen, "listening for aliveness" is key. As described here, it involves a very different set of assumptions:

- 1) The "more" of each person that we can welcome into the room, the more productive our meetings can be;
- 2) Having someone in the role of "designated listener" helps protect emergent creativity in potentially conflictual situations. Having others direct their contributions to whoever is holding this role, greatly supports "good group process."
- 3) Through the use of active listening and active protection, we can usefully welcome any kind of contribution at any point in a task-oriented dialogue, including initial solutions, concerns, and widely divergent perspectives.
- 4) Convergences can emerge spontaneously, when we create a safe interpersonal space within a meeting that allows participants to hold creative tension and to actively explore a diversity of perspectives.

The narratives have shown how these alternative assumptions allow facilitators to expand and deepen their ability to listen, and how in turn, this evokes a deeper kind of listening in the participants, one that leads to powerful emergent outcomes. For our listening to nourish us, we need to explore viable alternatives to our current deadening ways of "meeting" with one another, ways that too often are designed to "control" and "manage" rather than to fully support aliveness and empowerment. We need to deeply re-think the design of our current conversational systems, and we need to have the courage to question some of the widespread assumptions that underpin them. Among its various benefits, Dynamic Facilitation serves a "proof of concept" that demonstrates the possibility of highly effective alternatives to our current conversational systems.

NOTE: I welcome your comments or feedback to this paper. You can write to me at [rosa@diaprxaxis.com](mailto:rosa@diaprxaxis.com).

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