

THIRD EDITION

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE TO PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING



SAM KANER

WITH LENNY LIND, CATHERINE TOLDI,
SARAH FISK AND DUANE BERGER

JOSSEY-BASS™
A Wiley Brand

PRAISE FOR THIS REMARKABLE BOOK!

“We were fortunate to work with Sam on a number of projects, from *the Elders* to the *B Team* and many more working with Richard Branson and a collection of leaders. Sam is one of the best facilitators we’ve seen. He is able to bring together a diverse group of characters and masterfully guide them on a journey to help them open themselves towards a common understanding and solid outcomes. This book is a great insight into his unique skill set and wonderful leadership.”

—Jean Oelwang, CEO Virgin Unite/Group Partner

“A wonderful book, and Sarah Fisk is an amazing facilitator. As Board President I’ve learned so many skills for putting participatory values into practice. I’m looking forward to our Board continuing to benefit from Sarah’s consultation. The *Facilitator’s Guide* ought to be a resource to public service organizations everywhere.”

—Deane Marchbein, President of the Board of Directors,
Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders)

“NCDD has long listed the *Facilitator’s Guide* as one of the best-of-the-best resources for practitioners, and the field of public engagement has been deeply influenced by this seminal book. The tools and concepts it presents are foundational for any group process facilitator, and I highly recommend adding the new edition to your bookshelf!”

—Sandy Heierbacher, Director and co-founder,
National Coalition of Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD)

“It was a revelation to find the *Facilitator’s Guide* and realize someone had written down demonstrably the way our organization was already working organically. Kaner and Fisk are masters of their craft. Working with them and using this book has allowed us to put a translatable, trainable framework around what we do. This has had a large impact and has helped us build our own capacity. I highly recommend this book and working with Sam and Sarah.”

—Harley K. Dubois, founder, Burning Man Project

“The *Facilitator’s Guide* has been an incomparable resource for designing and leading more effective social architecture to get work done across diverse teams, functions and regions in my complex organization. The lessons and guidance I’ve taken from it have been nothing short of transformative for both my practice and my career.”

—D. Wade Shows,
Director of Learning & Organizational Effectiveness,
Kaiser Permanente

“Sam Kaner is one of the world’s leading experts on collaboration. His grasp of the challenges and dilemmas of collaboration is superb, as are his models and methods for facilitating complex processes. The second edition of this widely-used book reflects his accumulated wisdom and teachings. Clearly written and wonderfully illustrated, this book makes difficult issues understandable and provides sound, practical guidance.”

—Sandy Schuman, editor, *Creating a Culture of Collaboration*, and
founding editor, *Group Facilitation: A Research & Applications Journal*

“Our organization was founded to bring diverse partners together to work collaboratively to find solutions to difficult social problems. We know how immensely challenging it is to facilitate dialogue among multiple stakeholders. This amazing book is a comprehensive guide for meeting that challenge. I’ve worked with a myriad of consultants during the past 24 years, and Sam Kaner’s approach is vastly superior for bringing about lasting system change.”

—Kris Deiglmeier, CEO, Tides Network

“In cross-functional environments, where diverse perspectives are intentionally brought together to produce high-quality thinking, a highly skilled facilitator can add great value – and Sam Kaner is one of the best. The *Facilitator’s Guide* provides a full set of models and tools to enable an organization to reap the benefits of a well facilitated, participatory decision-making process. Having seen Sam’s methods in action, I can attest to their power and effectiveness.”

—Pierre Omidyar, founder and Chairman, eBay and Omidyar Network

“Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making is an outstanding resource for tackling complex community and business challenges. We have used it both at the City of Denver and at the State of Colorado, for strategic planning in our nationally recognized child welfare programs and in our innovative programs to end homelessness. I keep a copy on my desk for easy reference.”

—Roxane White, Chief of Staff for Governor John Hickenlooper, State Capitol, Denver Colorado

“At Stanford University I convene an annual conference attended by hundreds of non-profit leaders. Sam Kaner’s keynote presentations, based on material from this book, are consistently top-rated and likely to inspire significant organizational change.”

—Regina Starr Ridley, Publishing Director,
Stanford Social Innovation Review

“Working with Sam Kaner has been one of the most useful and rewarding experiences of my years as a manager and leader. He brings precision, clarity, imagination, good humor and a humane touch to the challenges we who aspire to guide organizations face. Using the tools and skills he describes in this book, Sam shaped 40 independent-minded and strong-willed faculty into a thoughtful, engaged and strategically-oriented group. If you can’t have Sam in person, I strongly recommend keeping a copy of *Facilitator’s Guide* on hand.”

—Edward Wasserman, Dean, Graduate School of Journalism, University of California, Berkeley

“As a leader of a firm involved with the governance and strategic oversight of multi-billion dollar organizations and portfolios, we find the principles and techniques in this book incredibly valuable in advancing the thinking of executive teams and boards. It has a direct effect on the impact our organizations have. Leaders and managers of any organization can benefit from the wisdom and pragmatic advice which this book delivers so effectively.”

—Mike Mohr, founder and CEO,
Comprehensive Financial Management LLC

“The brilliant and innovative tools in this book have had a profound effect on the way we in the Playfair organization run our meetings. Many of the Playfair facilitators who have been trained in the models presented here have achieved fabulous results with their clients, helping their interactions come alive with fun, originality and innovation. Highly recommended!”

—Matt Weinstein, founder, Playfair Inc.
and author, *Managing To Have Fun*

“Sam Kaner’s book is at once very thoughtful and reflective on the theory and dynamics of human process and at the same time full of practical ideas on how to make it work. That combination sets Sam’s work apart and was a key reason he was able to help create the Collaborative Leaders Network – a community problem solving initiative in Hawaii. Sam still contributes to our work, challenging us to make our problem-solving more and more effective.”

—Robbie Alm, President, Collaborative Leaders Network, Hawaii

“Every once in a long while a special individual comes along who helps others build their vision, skills and know-how to change the world around them. Sam Kaner helped me to do that at the Harwood Institute. Now, his guide can help you: read it, use it and make a real difference. Through this book, each of us can unleash our innate potential to find a more productive, inclusive and authentic path forward.”

—Rich Harwood, founder and President, The Harwood Institute

“Hooray for the *Facilitator’s Guide*. It explains principles, practices, and processes with cogent clarity, and each diagram conveys a complex idea almost instantly.”

—Joanna Macy, author, *World as Lover, World as Self*

“The *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* proved enormously helpful to our academic department. We all needed to learn more about facilitating open discussion, working with diverse groups, and reaching sustainable agreements. Now we have the tools we need to achieve these goals.”

—Laura Straus PhD, Chair of the Education Department,
University of Montana Western

“In my opinion, *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* is the best book on collaboration ever written. I say this as someone who has been a CEO or executive director for more than 20 years. During that time I have worked with countless facilitators and organization development consultants. For depth of impact and overall effectiveness, Sam Kaner and his colleagues are top-of-the-line. This book is loaded with the tools and guiding principles that make Sam’s work so compelling.”

—Diane Flannery, founding CEO, Juma Ventures, and director, Global Center for Children and Families, UCLA, Semel Institute

“Sam Kaner and his team have helped me create a culture of collaboration in science. This is no easy task! Twenty-five years ago I started with nothing. Now my organization has the potential to make a large impact by discovering causes of the most devastating diseases that affect children. Sam’s superb skills in strategic thinking and group facilitation, and his deep expertise in organization design and systems change have been essential for our success. In *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, Sam and his team translate their own learnings from many different kinds of work environments into concrete techniques that will benefit business, government and non-profits alike.”

— John Harris, MD,
founder and CEO, California Birth Defects Monitoring Program,
California Department of Health Services

“*Facilitator’s Guide* gives readers tools and insights to enable effective participatory action and the potential to achieve strong principled results and positive social change.”

—Michael Doyle, author, *How to Make Meetings Work*

“I am a longtime client and colleague of *Community At Work*. They are extraordinarily talented at facilitating effective teams and teaching others to do the same. Their consulting approach creates lasting solutions by promoting organizational health through collaborative working relationships. *Facilitator’s Guide* reveals and explains many of their most compelling methods and practices.”

—Ed Pierce, founder and CEO, Leadership Quality Inc.

“Facilitator’s Guide takes the mystery and fear out of facilitating groups and provides useful tools for anyone working with groups. The materials are clear. The graphics are first rate. And complex issues are developed logically and with great care.”

—Thomas Broitman, managing director,
Executive Education, PricewaterhouseCoopers, LLP

“This book is a must for anyone working with a team! It is loaded with new information, which will make your team facilitation and decision-making even better. It highlights key concepts underlying group process that are rarely defined in such a clear manner. And, at the same time, it provides easy-to-follow facilitation techniques to ensure group participation and convergence around decisions and ideas. This is a book that rarely stays on my shelf – I’m too busy using it as a reference. Truly a golden nugget in the vast pool of facilitation knowledge!”

—Tammy Adams, author, *Facilitating the Project Lifecycle*

“What a practical, sensible guide for helping groups work together in a realistic way! The graphics help you visualize how to manage many common – and puzzling – aspects of group behavior.”

—Marvin Weisbord, consultant and author, *Productive Workplaces* and co-author, *Discovering Common Ground* and *Future Search*

*“Marshall Medical Center is community based, and we have always valued a culture of participation. We frequently make inclusive decisions allowing buy-in to difficult actions we need to take as an organization. Using *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* and working with Sarah Fisk has helped us to maintain and even increase participation while still making timely decisions. Rather than simply relying on Sarah, who is a true genius at facilitation, this book has allowed us to build our own capacity. We’ve learned how to convene multiple stakeholder teams, plan effectively, and make more sustainable decisions, thus maintaining our collaborative values as we grow to serve a wider community. I highly recommend this book.”*

—James Whipple, CEO,
Marshall Medical Center, El Dorado County, California





Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making

Third Edition

Sam Kaner

with

Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi,
Sarah Fisk, and Duane Berger

Foreword by Michael Doyle

J JOSSEY-BASS™

A Wiley Brand

Cover design by Wiley

Cover illustration by Karen Kerney

Book design by Sam Kaner, Duane Berger, and Lenny Lind

Copyright © 2014 by *Community At Work*. All rights reserved.

Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Brand

One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200, San Francisco, CA 94104-4594—www.josseybass.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, 978-750-8400, fax 978-646-8600, or on the Web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, 201-748-6011, fax 201-748-6008, or online at www.wiley.com/go/permissions.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Neither the publisher nor author shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages. Readers should be aware that Internet Web sites offered as citations and/or sources for further information may have changed or disappeared between the time this was written and when it is read.

Jossey-Bass books and products are available through most bookstores. To contact Jossey-Bass directly call our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 800-956-7739, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3986, or fax 317-572-4002.

Wiley publishes in a variety of print and electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some material included with standard print versions of this book may not be included in e-books or in print-on-demand. If this book refers to media such as a CD or DVD that is not included in the version you purchased, you may download this material at <http://booksupport.wiley.com>. For more information about Wiley products, visit www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file.

ISBN: 978-1-1184-0495-9

Printed in the United States of America

THIRD EDITION

PB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

THE JOSSEY-BASS

BUSINESS & MANAGEMENT SERIES

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Michael Doyle and David Straus,
who found the language, the distinctions, and the methods
to bring inclusive, participatory values into the mainstream
of American management practices
and who, through their own continuing efforts and those of
their students and grandstudents and great-grandstudents,
may yet inspire humanity to use collaborative technology
for finding sustainable, nonviolent solutions to the world's
toughest problems.

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by Michael Doyle</i>	xv
<i>Introduction to the First Edition</i>	xxi
<i>Introduction to the Third Edition</i>	xxv

Part I: Grounding Principles

1	The Dynamics of Group Decision-Making	3
2	Participatory Values	23
3	Introduction to the Role of Facilitator	31

Part II: Facilitator Fundamentals

4	Facilitative Listening Skills	41
5	ChartWriting Technique	65
6	Brainstorming	79
7	Tools for Managing Long Lists	87
8	Facilitating Open Discussion	99
9	Alternatives to Open Discussion	113
10	Effective Agendas: Design Principles	145
11	Effective Agendas: Desired Outcomes	161
12	Effective Agendas: Process Design	177
13	Dealing with Difficult Dynamics	197
14	Classic Facilitator Challenges	215

Part III: Sustainable Agreements

15	Principles for Building Sustainable Agreements . . .	229
16	Inclusive Solutions in Real Life	239
17	Creative Reframing	253

CONTENTS, page 2

Part IV: Facilitating Sustainable Agreements

	Introduction to Part Four	262
18	Facilitating in the Divergent Zone	265
19	Facilitating in the Groan Zone	279
20	Facilitating in the Convergent Zone	295
21	Teaching a Group About Group Dynamics	309

Part V: Reaching Closure

22	The Significance of Clear Decision Rules	323
23	Striving for Unanimity	333
24	Reaching Closure Step By Step	347
25	Facilitating Sustainable Agreements	363

	<i>Photocopying Policy</i>	373
--	--------------------------------------	-----

	<i>Bibliography</i>	375
--	-------------------------------	-----

	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	381
--	----------------------------------	-----

	<i>The Authors</i>	387
--	------------------------------	-----

	<i>Index</i>	389
--	------------------------	-----

	<i>Covision</i>	399
--	---------------------------	-----

	<i>Community At Work</i>	400
--	------------------------------------	-----

	<i>Training from Community At Work</i>	401
--	--	-----

FOREWORD to the First Edition By Michael Doyle

I see group facilitation as a whole constellation of ingredients: a deep belief in the wisdom and creativity of people; a search for synergy and overlapping goals; the ability to listen openly and actively; a working knowledge of group dynamics; a deep belief in the inherent power of groups and teams; a respect for individuals and their points of view; patience and a high tolerance for ambiguity to let a decision evolve and gel; strong interpersonal and collaborative problem-solving skills; an understanding of thinking processes; and a flexible versus a lock-step approach to resolving issues and making decisions.

Facilitative behaviors and skills are essential for anyone who wants to work collaboratively in groups and organizations. Facilitative skills honor, enhance, and focus the wisdom and knowledge that lay dormant in most groups. These skills are essential to healthy organizations, esprit de corps, fair and lasting agreements, and to easily implement actions and plans.

Sam Kaner and the team from *Community At Work* have been developing and articulating these tools to further democratic action and to enable people from all walks of life to work together in more constructive and productive ways. The *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* will give readers additional tools and insights to enable effective, participatory action and the potential to achieve strong, principled results and positive social change. Anyone wanting to increase their understanding of group dynamics and improve their skill at making groups work more effectively will benefit from this valuable book.

The Purpose of Group Facilitation

Those who work with and lead organizations today have learned two lasting lessons in the last 25 years of concerted action research in this field of organization development and change. Lesson one: if people don't participate in and "own"

the solution to the problems or agree to the decision, implementation will be half-hearted at best, probably misunderstood, and, more likely than not, will fail.

The second lesson is that the key differentiating factor in the success of an organization is not just the products and services, not just its technology or market share, but the organization's ability to elicit, harness, and focus the vast intellectual capital and goodwill resident in their members, employees, and stakeholders. When that intellectual capital and goodwill get energized and focused, the organization becomes a powerful force for positive change in today's business and societal environments. Applying these two lessons has become a key element of what we have begun to think of as *the learning organization*.

How do leaders and their organizations apply these two lessons? By creating psychologically safe and involving group environments where people can identify and solve problems, plan together, make collaborative decisions, resolve their own conflicts, trouble-shoot, and self-manage as responsible adults. Facilitation enables the organization's teams, groups and meetings to be much more productive. And the side benefits of facilitated or self-facilitated groups are terrific: a sense of empowerment, a deepening of personal commitment to decisions and plans, increased organizational loyalty, and the building of esprit de corps.

Nowhere are these two lessons put more into practice than in groups. The world meets a lot. The statistics are staggering. There are over 25 million meetings every day in the United States and over 85 million worldwide. Making both our work groups and civic groups work much more effectively is a lifelong challenge as rich as the personalities that people them. Thus, what I call "group literacy" – an awareness of and strong skills in group dynamics, meeting facilitation and consensus building tools like the ones in this book – is essential to increasing the effectiveness of group meetings. They enable groups to work smarter, harder, deeper, and faster. These tools help build healthier groups, organizations, and communities.

Facilitative mind-sets, behaviors, and tools are some of the essential ingredients of high-commitment/high-performance organizations. They are critical to making real what we've come to think of as *the learning organization*. These skills and behaviors are aligned with people's higher selves. People naturally want to learn them in order to increase their own personal effectiveness in groups and in their families as well as to increase the effectiveness of groups themselves.

A Partial History of Group Facilitation

The concept of facilitation and facilitators is as old as the tribes. Alaskan natives report of this kind of role in ancient times. As a society we're starting to come full circle – from the circle of the tribe around the fire, to the pyramidal structures of the last 3,000 years, back to the ecology of the circle, flat pyramids, and networks of today's organizations. The philosophy, mind-set, and skills of facilitation have much in common with the approaches used by Quakers, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and people in nonviolence movements over the centuries. More recently these include the civil rights movement, women's consciousness-raising groups, some parts of the environmental movement, and citizen involvement groups that started in the 1960s and 1970s.

Meeting facilitation started to appear as a formal process in the late 1960s and early 1970s and had become widespread by the late 1980s. Its proponents advocated it as a tool to assist people to become the architects of their own future. It evolved from the role of *learning facilitators* that emerged in the early 1960s. In learning or encounter groups, the facilitator's focus was on building awareness and enabling learning. These *learning/awareness facilitators* played key roles in the nascent human potential movement and the women's consciousness-raising movement and continue to do so in today's version of lifelong learning situations where learning is seen as a dialogue rather than a rote process. Its pragmatic roots also include cognitive science, information processing theory, sociology, psychology, community organizing, arbitration and mediation principles, and experience.

Task-oriented group facilitation evolved out of the societal milieu of the last thirty years, especially in industrial and information-rich societies where time is a key factor. We needed to find methods for people to work together more effectively. Quality circle groups, cross-functional task forces, and civic groups were the early big users and advocates of this methodology. Facilitation was an informal, flexible alternative to the constricting format of parliamentary procedure and *Robert's Rules of Order*. Group facilitation was also an approach that was proactive, solving conflicts before they arose, as well as one that could handle multiple constituencies. It was a viable alternative to mediation-style approaches. Once participants in a learning group or consciousness-raising group raised their awareness, they wanted to take action. There was an expressed need to put their new insights and knowledge to work – to take actions, solve problems, plan, and make group decisions. Thus the role of the task-oriented facilitator evolved to serve these needs as well as the new approaches to organizational change and renewal that were developing in the early 1970s.

As two of the cofounders of meeting facilitation, David Straus and I were interested in giving people tools to architect their own more powerful futures. That meant giving them frameworks and tools to make the groups they worked and lived with much more effective, powerful, and productive. We saw group facilitation as both a social contract and a new, content neutral role – a more formalized third party role in groups. We articulated the difference and power between “content” and “process” neutrality. Content neutrality means not taking a position on the issues at hand; not having a position or a stake in the outcome. Process neutrality means not advocating for certain kinds of processes such as brainstorming. We found that the power in the role of the facilitator was in becoming content neutral and a process advocate – advocating for fair, inclusive, and open processes that would balance participation and improve productivity while establishing a safe psychological space in which all group members could fully participate.

The role of the facilitator was designed to help minimize wheel spinning and dysfunctional dynamics and to enable groups to work together much more effectively. Other key pioneers of facilitation in the 1970s were Geoff Ball and David Sibbet with

their seminal work in graphic recording and graphic facilitation. The core concepts and tools of group facilitation seemed to grow out of the tight-knit organization development and training community in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1970s and '80s. It is great to see Sam Kaner and his colleagues continuing this rich legacy of theory and skill building.

Researchers at the *Institute for the Future* postulate that it takes about 30 years for social inventions to become widespread. Group facilitation is one such social invention. Over these last 25 years, facilitation skills have spread widely in the United States and are being spread around the world. And now, organizations are coming full circle. Facilitators once again are being utilized in *learning organizations* to facilitate dialogue processes that surface deep assumptions and mental models about how we view our world. These existing mental models are often the underlying sources of conflict and dysfunction. By surfacing, examining, and changing them, we are able to work together in new ways to build new systems thinking models that assist groups in articulating their core values and beliefs. These new mental models serve as the foundation for organizations as they evolve, grow, and transform themselves to meet the challenges of the next century.

Expanding Definitions of Facilitation

These skills have become so useful in organizations that they have spread beyond the role of facilitator: to facilitative leaders; to self-facilitative groups and teams; to facilitative individuals and even facilitative, user-friendly procedures. Facilitation has become part of our everyday language. The Latin root of *facilitate* means “to enable, to make easy.” *Facilitation* has evolved to have a number of meanings today.

A facilitative individual is an individual who is easy to work with, a team player, a person aware of individual and group dynamics. He or she assists colleagues to work together more effectively. A facilitative individual is a person who is skilled and knowledgeable in the interpersonal skills of communication, collaborative problem solving and planning, consensus building, and conflict resolution.

A facilitator is an individual who enables groups and organizations to work more effectively; to collaborate and achieve synergy. She or he is a “content-neutral” party who by not taking sides or expressing or advocating a point of view during the meeting, can advocate for fair, open, and inclusive procedures to accomplish the group’s work. A facilitator can also be a learning or a dialogue guide to assist a group in thinking deeply about its assumptions, beliefs, and values and about its systemic processes and context.

A facilitative leader is a leader who is aware of group and organizational dynamics; a leader who creates organization-wide involvement processes that enable members of the organization to more fully utilize their potential and gifts in order to help the organization articulate and achieve its vision and goals, while at the same time actualizing its spoken values. Facilitative leaders often understand the inherent dynamics between facilitating and leading and frequently utilize facilitators in their organizations.

A facilitative group (team, task force, committee, or board) is one in which facilitative mind-sets and behaviors are widely distributed among the members; a group that is minimally dysfunctional and works very well together; a group that is easy to join and works well with other groups and individuals.

I think you, the reader, will find this book very useful for your work in groups, whether you are a leader, a group member, or a facilitator. I especially recommend to you the insightful chapters on understanding group dynamics, facilitative listening, and the importance of values. Where this book also makes a real contribution is in the chapters on reaching closure and the gradients of an agreement. I enjoyed the learnings and insights I received from this book, and I am sure you will too.

Michael Doyle
San Francisco, California
March 1996

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EDITION

The benefits of group decision-making have been widely publicized: better thinking, better “buy-in,” better decisions all around. Yet the promise often fails to materialize. Many decisions made in groups are neither thoughtful nor inclusive; they are unimaginative, watered-down mediocrities.

Why is this so?

To a large degree, the answer is deeply rooted in prevailing cultural values that make it difficult for people to actually think in groups. Without even realizing it, many people make value judgments that inhibit spontaneity and deter others from saying what is really on their minds. For example, ideas that are expressed in clumsy ways, or in tentative terms, are often treated as if they were decidedly inferior to ideas that are presented with eloquent rhetorical flourish. Efforts to explore complexities are discouraged, in favor of pithy judgments and firm-sounding conclusions. Making action plans – no matter how unrealistic they might be – is called “getting something done,” while analyzing the underlying causes of a problem is called “going off on a tangent.” Mixed messages abound: speak your mind but don’t ask too many questions; be passionate but don’t show your feelings; be productive but hurry up – and get it right the first time. All said, conventional values do not promote effective thinking in groups.

Yet, when it’s done well, group decision-making remains the best hope for solving difficult problems. There is no substitute for the wisdom that results from a successful integration of divergent points of view. Successful group decision-making requires a group to take advantage of the full range of experience and skills that reside in its membership. This means encouraging people to speak up. It means *inviting* difference, not fearing it. It means struggling to understand one another, especially in the face of the pressures and contradictions that typically drive group members to shut down. In short, it means operating from *participatory* values.

PARTICIPATORY GROUPS

Everyone participates, not just the vocal few.

People give each other room to think and get their thoughts all the way out.

Opposing viewpoints are allowed to co-exist in the room.

People draw each other out with supportive questions. “Is *this* what you mean?”

Each member makes the effort to pay attention to the person speaking.

People are able to listen to each other’s ideas because they know *their own ideas will also be heard*.

Each member speaks up on matters of controversy. Everyone knows where everyone stands.

Members can accurately represent each other’s points of view – even when they don’t agree with them.

People refrain from talking behind each other’s backs.

Even in the face of opposition from the person-in-charge, people are encouraged to stand up for their beliefs.

A problem is not considered solved until everyone who will be affected by the solution understands the reasoning.

When people make an agreement, it is assumed that the decision still reflects a wide range of perspectives.

CONVENTIONAL GROUPS

The fastest thinkers and most articulate speakers get more airtime.

People interrupt each other on a regular basis.

Differences of opinion are treated as *conflict* that must either be stifled or “solved.”

Questions are often perceived as challenges, as if the person being questioned has done something wrong.

Unless the speaker *captivates* their attention, people space out, doodle or check the clock.

People have difficulty listening to each other’s ideas because they’re busy rehearsing what *they* want to say.

Some members remain quiet on controversial matters. No one really knows where everyone stands.

People rarely give accurate representations of the opinions and reasoning of those whose opinions are at odds with their own.

Because they don’t feel permission to be direct *during* the meeting, people talk behind each other’s backs outside the meeting.

People with discordant, minority perspectives are commonly discouraged from speaking out.

A problem is considered solved as soon as the fastest thinkers have reached an answer. Everyone else is then expected to “get on board” regardless of whether s/he understands the logic of the decision.

When people make an agreement, it is assumed that they are all thinking the exact same thing.

Participatory and conventional approaches to group decision-making yield entirely different group norms.

Some of the differences are presented in the table on the page to the left. As the table implies, a shift from conventional values to participatory values is not a simple matter of saying, “Let’s become a thinking team.” It requires a change of mindset – a committed effort from a group to swim against the tide of prevailing values and assumptions.

When a group undertakes this challenge, its participants often benefit from the services a competent facilitator can provide for them. Left to their own devices, many groups would slip back into conventional habits. A facilitator, however, has the skills to help a group outgrow their old familiar patterns. Specifically, the facilitator encourages full participation, s/he promotes mutual understanding, s/he fosters inclusive solutions and s/he cultivates shared responsibility. These four functions (discussed in depth in chapter 3) are derived from the core values of participatory decision-making.

Putting Participatory Values Into Practice

The facilitator is the keeper of the flame, the carrier of the vision of what Michael Doyle described, in his foreword, as “a fair, inclusive and open process.” This is why many facilitators help their groups to understand the dynamics and values of group decision-making. They recognize that it is empowering for participants to acquire common language and shared points of reference about their decision-making processes.

When a facilitator helps group members acquire process skills, s/he is acting in congruence with one of the core values of participatory decision-making: shared responsibility. This value played a prominent role in the design of *The Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*. It was written as a series of stand-alone pages that facilitators can photocopy and distribute to the members of their groups.

For example, newly forming groups often benefit from reading and discussing chapters 1 and 2. These pages take less than fifteen minutes to read; they are entertaining; and they provide the basis for meaningful conversations about the dynamics and values of participatory decision-making. Within the guidelines of the policy statement on photocopying (see page 373), feel free to reproduce any part of this book that will strengthen your group's capacity for reaching sustainable agreements.

Facilitating Sustainable Agreements

The process of building a sustainable agreement has four stages: gathering diverse points of view; building a shared framework of understanding; developing inclusive solutions; and reaching closure. A competent facilitator knows how to move a group from start to finish through those stages. To do so, s/he needs a conceptual understanding of the dynamics and values of participatory decision-making (as provided in Part I of this book). S/he also needs a standard set of process management skills (as provided in Part II). And s/he needs a repertoire of sophisticated thinking tools, to propose and conduct stage-specific interventions (as provided in Part III and Part IV).

Fulfilling The Promise of Group Decision-Making

Those who practice participatory methods often come to see that facilitating a meeting is more than merely an occasion for solving a problem or creating a plan. It is also an opportunity to support profound personal learning, and it is an opportunity to strengthen the capacity and effectiveness of the group as a whole. These opportunities are only realizable – the promise of group decision-making can only be fulfilled – through the struggle and the satisfaction of putting participatory values into practice.

INTRODUCTION TO THE THIRD EDITION

1. The Power of Groups

When we began writing this book in 1990, the term *group facilitator* was still rather exotic. Most people said, “Facilitator? What’s that?”

Things have shifted quite a bit in 25 years. From an obscure “neutral third party” role – narrowly focused on *helping groups do their best thinking* – now “facilitator” is a synonym for a wide collection of group leadership roles, from “trainer” to “chair” to “convenor” to “manager.” Thus, at the time of this writing, in 2014, the word has come to mean anything and everything that is associated with healthy group functioning.

Yet in another sense, the essence of the role has remained constant: *facilitation*, first and most, *is about groups*. Whether the facilitator is teaching, or leading, or mediating, or simply managing a process, the purpose of the role is to strengthen the effectiveness of the group of people who are there to get the work done. The facilitator helps, serves, teaches, guides. Whereas it is the group that resolves, decides, produces, *acts*.

One of the great insights of the 20th century is this: sitting down to work in a small face-to-face group is, potentially, transformative. The opportunity is there, if you want it, to say what you’re really thinking; and to receive feedback on what you’ve said and how it comes across; and to stretch and hear the thoughts and feelings of others whose worldviews diverge from yours; and to struggle and triumph as you learn how to think from those other points of view. Every time we sit down and roll up our sleeves to engage across the table of a small face-to-face group – of maybe five or ten or twenty people – every time we enter that context we enter the world of opportunities to change ourselves and grow.

And in the act of changing and growing, we shift the perceptions and the experiences of our group members too.

Which in turn makes the whole group stronger, and wiser, and more confident. And often, more courageous. As a group, we hold a key to changing the world. Seldom do we use that key; seldom do we even try. But the opportunity is there: latent, waiting – if we want it.

We can call it participatory decision-making. We can call it social innovation. We can call it dialogue and deliberation. We can call it cross-functional teams, or multi-stakeholder collaboration. We can call it collective impact. Whatever we call it, we are talking about unleashing the transformative power of face-to-face groups, first to raise awareness and evoke mutual compassion, and then – potentially – to embolden participants to align their aspirations and undertake new, jointly developed actions that aim, with hope and courage, to address, and even resolve, the world's toughest problems.

Such is the opportunity that awaits us when we engage in serious work in our face-to-face groups – and *this* is the context in which the role of facilitator matters most. For those neutral, third party people who want to support face-to-face groups to do their best thinking, it is for you we wrote this book, and it is to you we tip our hat. The work is challenging, the burden can be heavy, the temptations are endless, and at the end of the day the role is a journey on a profoundly lonely path. To those readers who perceive this work as your calling, we salute you.

2. Participatory Culture

Notwithstanding the benefits of having a facilitator on hand, what is *the group's responsibility* in a participatory process?

In other words: suppose a very talented facilitator were to help a group do a great job of wrestling with a tough problem. The members participate fully. They build mutual understanding. They find a solution that works for everyone, and they move ahead with actions that bring the solution to life. Everyone in the group states that the experience has been “life-changing” or words to that effect. Now the facilitator's contract with the group ends, and she departs.

Where does that leave the group?

Based on our experiences of observing our own groups and many others, we think that even the best facilitation in the universe does not, in and of itself, adequately and sustainably address the fourth participatory value, *shared responsibility*. If group members want to sustain a transformation that has been inaugurated by a well-facilitated process of participatory decision-making, then it falls on them to install and preserve an authentically participatory culture – manifesting the four core values described in chapter 2 of this book:

- *Full participation*
- *Mutual understanding*
- *Inclusive solutions*
- *Shared responsibility*

This is a tough proposition for a group that has ended its relationship with its facilitator.

So long as a facilitator is engaged, s/he can capture the cooperation and enthusiasm of the group by, for example, using facilitative listening skills and for that matter the entire collection of tools described in this book. In effect, the facilitator guides the group members into a participatory mindset, and assists them to remain in that mindset, for the duration of the facilitated process.

To do that the facilitator works continuously to achieve three ongoing objectives:

- *Build and sustain a respectful, supportive atmosphere*
- *Stay out of the content and manage the process*
- *Teach the group new thinking skills as the process unfolds, in order to build their capacity for collaboration.*

These three practices are critical. They are the soil in which the four participatory core values take root. They are the facilitator's core competencies for building a participatory environment.

When a facilitator's contract with a group ends, the aftermath leaves the group in this quandary: they may have cultivated a participatory mindset sincerely – they may have truly seen the benefits of full participation and all the kindred participatory values – but who is now going to take responsibility for maintaining the respectful, supportive atmosphere? Who is going to manage the process of the group conversation? The only hope is that their facilitator, along the way, had a good strategy for *teaching the group how to do those things themselves*.

For facilitators who care about helping their groups to build durable participatory cultures, using good listening skills, for example, is just not enough! We have to teach people what we're doing. Hence, we have to encourage our groups to place on their agendas, every so often, a slot for *continuous learning*, for maybe 30-40 minutes and even sometimes an hour, when we can teach a new skill – a listening skill, an energy management skill, a categorizing skill, and so on. We need our meeting planners to understand what we're doing, so they will set aside adequate time for experiential activity that lets their group members learn like adults, with practice and feedback and a few minutes to debrief and integrate the learning. Then in subsequent meetings we need to help people find ways to *apply* their new skills.

In short, a facilitator can provide the group with the mindset, the models, the skills and the tools to:

- treat each other respectfully and supportively;
- step away from the content of their conversations so they can discuss and manage their own process; and
- engage in *continuous learning*, to build their capacity for collaboration.

In fact, when a facilitator is committed to transitioning a group from a temporary, facilitator-driven participatory environment to a durable, group member-driven participatory culture, s/he can begin transferring the models and tools right from the start of his or her time with the group, by focusing on building the group's communication and process-management capacity at every step of the way.