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# Dynamic Facilitation and the Magic of Self-Organizing Change

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(This article appeared in the June 1997 issue of the Association for Quality and Participation Journal.)

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After a college basketball game I spent a few moments with one of the players to help him improve his shot. The player knew that my son had been the national leader in three point shooting the year before and assumed I was a coach. He asked me to help him and I eagerly accepted. I watched him shoot a few times and mentioned out loud some of what I was noticing. Each time I said something he reacted and asked what he should do differently. I didn't know exactly, but I knew telling him wouldn't help. I asked him to walk far out beyond his range and then shoot. He couldn't reach the basket from there and looked at me questioningly. "Do whatever it takes to get it there," I suggested. With resolution and relying on some kind of innate knowledge, he threw the ball toward the bucket. Without my coaching he was heaving the ball in balance and using more of his body. He was in rhythm. Moving closer to the basket he adapted this motion into a new shot and made buckets with far greater accuracy. He said it felt weird but was no longer asking me for coaching. Now he was coaching himself having learned something his body had taught him.

## There are Two Kinds of Change

Many had tried to coach him before, but coaching wasn't what he needed. Instead I facilitated a process where he brought himself to a new level of capability. A facilitator elicits and sustains this kind of breakthrough change process, whether it is in a person, in a group, or in an organization. Rather than trying to explain or teach what is needed, the facilitator attends to the process of change and trusts that things will self-organize. Examples of such self-organization are:

- new insights where problems are spontaneously solved;
- changes of heart where the trust level shifts and adversaries become friends;
- a shift from dependency to empowerment;
- a change of management style, from control to self-management;
- people discovering what they really want instead of what they thought they wanted.

Because of the mechanistic paradigm we live in, changes like these can seem like magic. To understand facilitation we must recognize that there are two fundamentally different kinds of change:

### **Type 1: Manageable change**

This model has explained the universe for hundreds of years. It holds that extrinsic forces, or causes, make

change happen. Because of this change can be predetermined, measured and controlled. This model views the universe as though it is a giant machine following natural laws. Goals can be set and procedures followed to achieve the goals. Ultimately this view means accepting the idea that the universe is predetermined. Our culture views this Newtonian model as truth, common sense.

## Type 2: Self-organizing change

Self-organizing change is more like a garden than a machine. Things are growing all the time by themselves, drawn out by an inner life quest for quality and efficiency. This growth is transformational, things can radically change their course spontaneously. Aspects can be planned, and growth can be anticipated, but fundamentally, this change process is not plannable. Type 1 methods are used, but it is recognized that they are not always applicable. In this model success is sought in the quality of relationship with nature, not power over it. (see chart below)

## Two Models of Change

	<b>Manageable (Type 1)</b>	<b>Self-Organizing (Type 2)</b>
	e.g. a machine, monarchy, traditional meeting	e.g. a living organism, democracy, dialogue
<b>How order is determined</b>	<b>It is organized by someone</b> (extrinsic forces) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build it / Do it... with no mistakes</li> <li>• Closed boundaries</li> <li>• Mostly stable with periodic disorder</li> </ul>	<b>Order comes from within</b> (intrinsic energy) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore / trial and error</li> <li>• Open boundaries</li> <li>• Dynamic... between chaos and order</li> </ul>
<b>Thinking</b>	<b>Stay rational</b> ....avoid the unconscious mind <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decide on goals ... avoid feelings</li> <li>• Discern and analyze</li> <li>• Stop things from going wrong</li> </ul>	<b>Be creative</b> ....work with the unconscious mind <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energy driven... include feelings</li> <li>• Generate and synthesize</li> <li>• Seek what's right ... i.e. quality</li> </ul>
<b>Leadership</b>	<b>Manage to get results</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can measure progress</li> <li>• Emphasize extrinsic motivation ....(rewards)</li> <li>• Static process... step by step</li> </ul>	<b>Facilitate the process</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use milestones to reflect on progress</li> <li>• Emphasize intrinsic motivation ....(mission, vision)</li> <li>• Dynamic process... the flow</li> </ul>
<b>Orientation</b>	<b>Stop things from going wrong</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are objective constraints</li> <li>• All is measurable</li> <li>• Eliminate chaos</li> </ul>	<b>Help things go right</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expect breakthroughs</li> <li>• Measuring everything can mess things up</li> <li>• Some chaos is essential</li> </ul>

## **The Dynamic Facilitator Focuses on Type 2 Change**

To facilitate is to elicit, sustain, and enhance self-organizing change. To facilitate a meeting, for example, is to let go of controlling others toward pre-defined results and to help them accomplish what they want. The true facilitator not only helps meeting participants self-manage but he or she also helps shift the thinking process to be self-organizing. This is what is meant by the word *creative*.

Self-organizing change cannot be planned. Progress happens through breakthroughs of different kinds. Not only might there be original insights, but the people involved are changed by the creative process. They might enter the meeting feeling one way and leave feeling the opposite. In a self-organizing dynamic people grow in trust, in their desire for responsibility and in their systems understanding. Just as an analytical process helps people understand the elements of a system, the self-organizing dynamic builds understanding of the whole system.

The results of a self-organizing process can seem magical because change happens by itself. The mechanistic paradigm can't account for this change so when it happens, it is either ignored, or the methods of the facilitator gets packaged into a "technique." For example, if taking basketball players outside their range works with players in general, then it could become an accepted technique to improve a person's shot. Trainers would then be hired to teach the technique and facilitators hired to make sure that people did the technique right. The miracle of self-organization would still be there, but our paradigm would frame it as though the miracle had been explained.

Many facilitators focus on techniques. Brainstorming, visioning, the workshop method, Pareto's charts, or fishbone diagrams can elicit a self-organizing dynamic in specific situations. They can also be assembled into packages of techniques and directed toward a particular class of problems. Examples are: Future Search Conferences for large organizations to build a culture among stakeholders, JAD for systems design, ToP (Technology of Participation) for communities of people, or Synectics to seek innovations. The facilitator who focuses on specific techniques is a "static facilitator." A dynamic facilitator might also use these techniques or packages, but always to support the self-organizing dynamic. Rules or techniques become secondary.

To illustrate the difference let me tell a story. Recently while playing tennis, a young boy ran across the back of the court where we were playing. The person I was playing with and I hardly noticed. When he got to the other court, his father stopped playing and angrily and animatedly scolded the boy. At this point I became attentive and managed to discern that the father was scolding the boy for crossing behind our court during play. The boy hadn't been disruptive but the father's anger and his way of scolding the boy were.

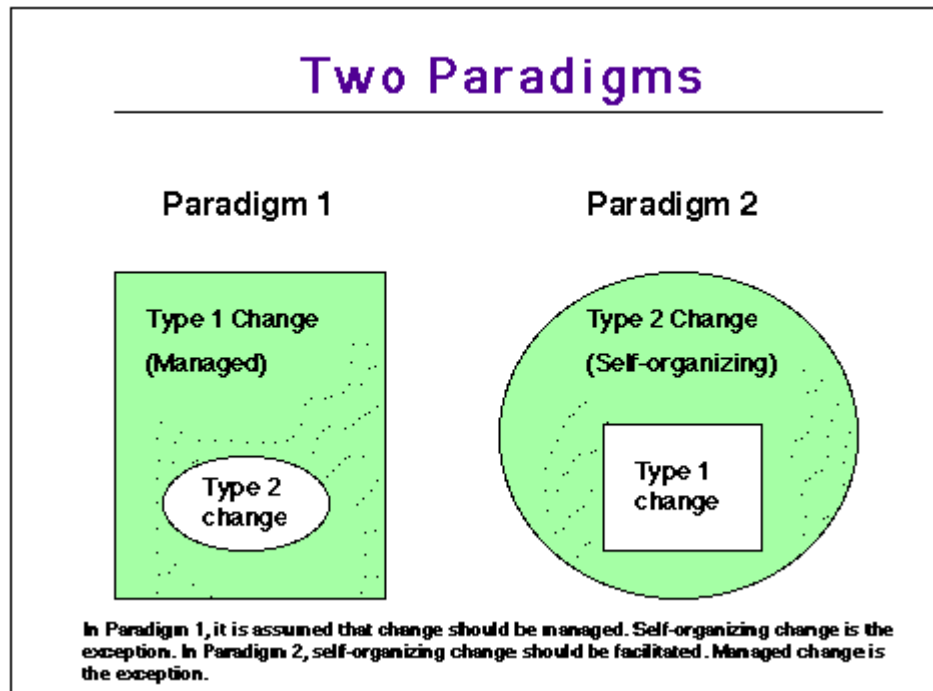
The father was focused on the rules of etiquette, the "static process." But in this case his focus worked against the higher purpose of why the rules were there. The rules are intended to support a dynamic of courtesy. A focus on the static process can't guarantee that dynamic.

## **Dynamic Facilitation is the New Paradigm of Leadership**

Each type of change is associated with a different paradigm. (Chart 2) Those in Paradigm 1, see the universe as a place where outside forces make change happen. The universe is comprised of dead matter which can be broken apart into smaller and smaller pieces. Paradigm 1 has no place for living organisms. It assumes that life itself will eventually be explained in terms of matter and forces. This paradigm of Newtonian science has been extremely successful for our culture. It is also destructive when we use it to organize what is alive, like educating our children or organizing companies. For instance, to assume that people need to be motivated through incentives, rewards, recognition or punishments, is to diminish them.

Paradigm 1 is in real trouble because modern science has shown that it is not accurate. The quantum

revolution in physics has made it clear that the universe is fundamentally more alive than dead. As Margaret Wheatley points out in her book, *Leadership and the New Science*, our view of management just hasn't quite caught up with these discoveries. Even rocks are life-like at the subatomic level. Within them are complex quanta that act spontaneously and indeterminately. Current science, in other words, is telling us that the world view of self-organizing change is more accurate than the world view of manageable change.



The difference in the two paradigms is illustrated by how two teachers work with their children. One teacher will have all the children working on their assigned tasks, each kid on the same page of the workbook, everyone facing the front of the room. Objective tests measure progress toward learning objectives and there are gold stars on the wall to recognize excellence. Paradigm 1 keeps order in the classroom and assures measurable progress as long as the teacher is there and in control. When she leaves the room, this highly organized structure dissipates and the kids revert to chaos.

Down the hall, in another classroom, there is a teacher in Dynamic 2. She has kids in small groups working on projects they are interested in. There is a low level of disorder as the kids get up and move around the room. This is a different kind of order because it is self-ordering. This class also uses charts to track progress, but these are primarily for self assessment. When this teacher leaves the room, the kids carry on with their work as they did before. Since they are intrinsically motivated there is nothing to rebel against.

The first teacher probably doesn't understand Type 2 change. Rooted in Paradigm 1 she thinks, "I tried it but it didn't work." When she tried it, she may have let go of keeping tight order, but she didn't facilitate.

The teacher may also have tried to keep order and manage change through techniques. This static facilitation approach has risks because creative change has added vulnerability. Mixing the paradigms can wound people deeply. For instance, many people remember throughout their lives the pain they felt in hearing judgmental words by a kindergarten or preschool teacher when they first tried to write or paint. When Type 2 change is cut short by Paradigm 1, people can feel betrayed. Paradigm 1 talks exclusively about the need for goals, roles, action plans and ways to measure progress. The dynamic facilitator, on the other hand, seems to waffle about these "essentials." Having them is desirable, but he or she understands how they also can subvert transformational change.

Problems in mixing the two types of change work the other way as well. Those in Paradigm 1 can find dynamic facilitation uncomfortable. A basketball coach, for instance, might watch me working with the player on his shot and become alarmed. He could feel threatened saying, "In our basketball program, we start with fundamentals and build up. We can't have you telling players to heave the ball. We want all our players to practice the same fundamentals." This sounds reasonable. It is Type 1 common sense. Type 2 change can threaten this perspective.

For a number of years now, I've taught a seminar in dynamic facilitation skills. The essence of the seminar is for people to experience the validity of the self-organizing dynamic and to learn how to facilitate small groups dynamically. A structure, "choice-creating," is presented which identifies a sequence of thinking. This is not a static, step by step process the facilitator takes people through. Instead it is a framework to guide the facilitator in supporting the natural, creative process to unfold.

The seminar itself seeks a self-organizing dynamic so people can break through in their capabilities. Skills and techniques for supporting a fundamental paradigm shift. Recently after a seminar, however, one attendee said he was glad he came because he learned a lot of new techniques he could put in his bag of tricks. I was glad to hear he was pleased, but saddened because his words showed he didn't "get it." Those who "get it" say things like "it's a new level of thinking," or "it validates something I've always known but just didn't have words for." To facilitate dynamically means working from Paradigm 2. To stay in the old paradigm and facilitate statically misses the point.

## **The New Bottom Line**

Many companies are ostensibly seeking to achieve the self-organizing dynamic. The quality movement in business is an example. Management consultant, Peter Senge, says it this way, "If you don't understand that the quality movement is about intrinsic motivation, then you don't understand the quality movement." Many companies, consultants and advice columns are deeply rooted in Paradigm 1. They propose setting measurable goals, planning actions, clarifying roles, learning the latest techniques, and maintaining control. They expect facilitators to act as "process cops," holding people to predetermined processes. These vital skills are secondary, not primary. They cannot be allowed to get in the self-organizing processes that build integrity, respect, trust, relationship, fun, quality, and creativity.

The president of one organization understood what was needed but his next level of managers didn't. They had been clamoring for a clear definition of roles. They wanted to know exactly what was expected of them so they could excel. The president knew that telling them his ideas would not generate a self-organizing dynamic.

The group was in a confused state until a breakthrough occurred. The breakthrough came in the form of a paradoxical statement: "Never do the mission of this company." This statement served as a symbol for them to remember that their job was to help the people under them do the mission of the company. This statement helped them to stop managing and start facilitating. No longer did they need or want clear expectations. Each person was excited about this new permission to use their own judgment.

The shift in dynamics can be initiated at the bottom of the organization as well. A group of road crew workers met and worked on their problem of getting adequate help for flagging cars. The county commissioners had told them that, to save money, they could only hire part time flaggers. The road crew met each week in facilitated meetings. They looked at their problem creatively. They determined that hiring full time flaggers was ultimately cheaper and it narrowed the county's exposure to lawsuits if there was an accident. They met with the county commissioners in a public hearing. From the way they presented their findings it was clear to everyone that these workers really understood the problem and were making responsible choices. The county commissioners were put in a predicament because they had been making judgments without truly understanding the situation. Not only was their decision reversed, but the group's

work set a precedent. The road crew meetings changed the management style of the county.

These examples illustrate how the shift from Dynamic 1 to Dynamic 2 can be initiated in an organization. After it begins, however, it also needs maintenance. It is like the change from a push lawn mower to a power mower. The power mower can cut far more grass but it requires gas and maintenance to continue to work. The gas of a self-organizing dynamic is trust and the maintenance is the on-going conversations that build that trust. The facilitator helps assure the quality of conversation about issues that build trust.

The "bottom line" of the old organization, is literally the bottom line on a profit and loss statement. It is fully measurable. But the bottom line of the new organization is the sense of integrity and mutual respect of people working toward a shared mission. This can't be measured. It needs to be self-assessed frequently. Dynamically facilitated meetings can provide this new form of leadership.

## **Final Thoughts**

From the perspective of the traditional paradigm, dynamic facilitation seemingly yields magical results. The basketball player was blocked in his progress, yet after being facilitated for just a few moments, he started changing his shot and teaching himself. Most management literature assumes that the answer is ever more stringent application of controlled change, setting clear objectives and making accurate measurements. But these answers actually block self-organizing change and limit the transformational possibility and the spirit of excellence. Just the language of control can block the new dynamic.

Those in the traditional paradigm are in a dilemma. It is not easy to let go of what has worked for so long. Acknowledging the reality of self-organizing change undermines the paradigm by which we think. Most avoid the dilemma altogether by using techniques, or static processes, as though they "cause" predictable change.

But a paradigm shift is happening anyway. A general awareness is growing that the self-organizing dynamic not only exists but it is primary. In the end, we all must let go of control and facilitate dynamically. Great basketball players, great people, and great companies are self-organizing.

A well facilitated meeting opens the door to self-organizing change. The dynamic facilitator is midwife to new ways of being and knowing how to facilitate is the core competency of leadership in the world to come.

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