

# A CREDO FOR FACILITATORS

Peter Adler, John Barkai, Donna Ching, Dolores Foley, Holly Henderson, Kem Lowry, Tom Mitrano, and Jane Yamashiro<sup>1</sup>

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## WHO WE ARE

We are professionals who provide technical assistance to groups. Some of us work with communities. Others of us work in business and government settings. Generally, we are retained to assist groups as they try to exchange information, gather feedback, consult with others, build consensus, make plans, solve problems, or resolve conflicts and disputes.

Although we each come to our work with a different style or approach, we often share the term “facilitator” to describe our efforts. In turn, the word “facilitation” can mean many things and sometimes obscures more than it reveals. Depending on the orientation of the facilitator and the needs and desires of the group, we variously find ourselves doing any or all of the following:

*Situation or Conflict Analysis*, in which we are retained to examine specific substantive, relational, and procedural circumstances and the readiness of a group to participate in some kind of strategic meeting process.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Adler is President & CEO of The Keystone Center. John Barkai teaches ADR and conflict resolution at the University of Hawaii’s Richardson School of Law. Donna Ching is a teacher and facilitator with the Center of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources at the University of Hawaii. Dolores Foley and Kem Lowry teach conflict resolution in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Hawaii. Holly Henderson is a consultant and facilitator working in the business and social services sectors. Tom Mitrano and Jane Yamashiro are consultants and facilitators in the business sector.

*Process Design* in which we help a group set goals and fashion specific procedures to meet those goals.

*Training* in which we prepare groups with the skills they will need to participate in specific types of interactions.

*Team-building* in which we help groups cohere for purposes of achieving their own articulated goals.

*Partnering* in which we help groups form specific alliances, confederations, or associations, usually to accomplish mutually advantageous and tangible near-term goals.

*Coaching* in which we advise groups on both process and the substance of the outcomes they are working towards.

*Chairing, Moderating, and Meeting Management* in which we help organize and run meetings.

These are some of the different roles we play when we are employed by groups.

The convictions we hold in common and the reasons to articulate them are important to us. At core, we believe in the inherent wisdom of groups and the high value of collaboration and consensus-seeking, with or without facilitators. Conventional decision making often favors some interest groups and excludes others, usually those who challenge the status quo.

In turn, those who challenge the status quo sometimes behave in ways that often appear strident, intolerant, and self-righteous. True collaboration and consensus-seeking encourages a full diversity of view points and the joint search for creative and innovative group solutions to complex substantive, procedural, and relational conflicts. Our experience repeatedly shows us that genuinely collaborative decision making increases the chance of successful implementation. For facilitators, then, it is the group that commands ultimate allegiance, regardless of who bears or underwrites the costs of the process and the facilitator's fees.

Increasingly, however, those who know the term but not the underlying values and rationales are requesting facilitation for situations in which it is inappropriate. Facilitation is too often used as a form of flak catching, as walk-on meeting management, or at its worst -- as a means of lending legitimacy to "done deals." That is why we feel compelled to issue this statement of philosophy.

## OUR BELIEFS

1. **A GOOD FAITH CONTRACT.** We believe the job of the “facilitator” involves a three-way good faith contract that must be honored by (a) those who are sponsoring or convening the process; (b) those who are serving as facilitators of the process; and (c) those who are participating in the facilitated process.

The contract requires the sponsor, the facilitator and the group to disclose their roles and what the facilitation process entails. The contract requires those who are employing facilitators and acting as conveners to fully disclose what decision-making powers are and are not being delegated to the group. Last, the contract requires those who participate to clarify their relevant roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities to others within and outside the group, to the facilitator, and to the convener.

2. **TRUSTWORTHINESS AND IMPARTIALITY.** We believe that the first duty of a facilitator is to be a servant of the group and the process. This requires trustworthiness and impartiality and a guarantee that all parties will be treated equally and fairly in the discussion or decision-seeking process. Facilitators cannot advocate for one party’s point of view and must never participate in any process that is misrepresented as to its purpose or that is intended to circumvent legal processes. Sponsors and participants have the responsibility to help the facilitator maintain his/her impartiality by making them aware of instances in which they appear to be treating people unfairly.

3. **INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION.** We believe the job of the facilitator is to help groups have difficult and sometimes risky and far-reaching conversations that will affect other people, including those who may not be at the table. Collaboration begins with inclusion and participation. While the ultimate responsibility for deciding who is and is not invited to participate in a particular process rests with the convener and sponsor, facilitators have a duty to advocate for the widest representation and fullest participation.

4. **RESPECT FOR CULTURE.** We recognize that important meetings sometimes bring together people of different cultures, backgrounds and experience in public forums. We strive to design and conduct meetings that are sensitive to the cultural norms and expectations of the participants and their experiences in participating in public meetings.

Understanding who will participate in meetings is therefore a critical component of process design.

5. **CLARITY ABOUT OWNERSHIP AND DECISION MAKING.** We believe that sponsors and facilitators have a duty to group members to explain fully and completely (a) how decisions in the group will be made; (b) how any generated information will be used and who owns that information when the process is complete; and (c) where the groups activities and decisions will ultimately fit in the life of the issue under consideration. Hierarchy or other circumstances sometimes may mean that the final decision will not be made by the group; if so, this must be made clear from the beginning of the process.
6. **BETTER POLITICS.** We recognize that process facilitation is ultimately a political act. By “political” we mean that group discussions are usually an attempt to improve the collective good, that they bring together people with different kinds of power, and that they ultimately involve the making of difficult decisions about who gets what, for what purposes, and under what conditions. As facilitators, we assume a role of trusted third party. Throughout all of our work, we strive to increase the group’s productivity, to help create decisions that are fair, efficient, stable, wise, and transparent, to create good “road maps” for the future, and where possible, to heal old hurts and restore good relations. To do these things, we may play different roles. Sometimes we organize. Sometimes we coach. Sometimes we plan.
7. **THE FACILITATORS ROLE.** We believe that the role of the group facilitator can be significant and can help a group achieve great things. It is not a panacea, a way of life, a universal cure, or a therapy. Facilitation has limits, is often not appropriate, and can, when done badly, do tremendous damage. Facilitation therefore should not be done casually or assumed to be trivial. It carries serious responsibilities.

Because we believe that communities, businesses, legislators, and government agencies may find this document useful as they contract with facilitators, we encourage its circulation to anyone who serves as convener, sponsor, or user, of facilitation processes.