

**MY JOURNEY:  
LEARNING AND USING THE SKILLED FACILITATOR APPROACH  
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I first heard of the field of organizational psychology when I was a senior in college. Up to that point, I had sampled and enjoyed the usual mix of experimental, social, developmental, and clinical courses available to a psychology major, and while I knew that I wanted to continue to study human behavior, I was unsure of the direction I wished to take for graduate school and a subsequent career. After taking my first class in organizational psychology, I was hooked. For me, it was a way to investigate several questions that had intrigued me ever since I started working entry-level jobs in retail stores and restaurants: Why are so many jobs set up in a way that underutilizes people's interests and skills? Why are people often bored and frustrated with their jobs, even the ones that appear to be "good" jobs to an outside observer? And why do people seem willing to accept—or even expect—that they will dislike their job, when it's the one place they will spend many of their waking hours in their lifetime?

I entered the Ph.D. program in organizational psychology at the University of Michigan and had the opportunity to study many fascinating organizations, from the soon-to-be-defunct People Express Airlines to community-based group homes for the developmentally disabled. Two experiences in graduate school did the most to shape my future interests and career path. The first was a multi-year internship with a company in the computer industry, where several of my graduate student colleagues and I designed and implemented large-scale organizational change strategies for an engineering and manufacturing plant. As with many great learning opportunities, we were in completely over our heads much of the time, but it was very exciting to put into action the concepts and theories we had been learning—and teaching—in the classroom. As I worked with labor-management committees, quality of work life teams, and other groups, I developed a deep appreciation for the importance of effective group structure and process. I tried, with varying degrees of success, to help groups identify and carry out their goals, but saw how frequently they were stymied because not all the necessary people were around the table, or because they couldn't figure out how to communicate effectively due to years of accumulated resentments and misunderstandings. At times, I felt more like an anthropologist observing ineffective groups than an organization development consultant who had the skills to help them work together effectively. I knew I needed more experience, but there was something else missing as well. I did not yet have a coherent working theory of group facilitation to guide the various efforts I was initiating.

My second major formative experience in graduate school was my work as a coach in 360-degree feedback sessions with participants in executive education courses. Each participant in these intensive four-week-long courses received information about his or her leadership style from an instrument that compiled ratings from ten co-workers (boss, peers, and direct reports). My job was to help the participant understand and develop an action plan to respond to the feedback he or she had received. It was striking to see how often an executive's self-assessment would differ significantly from the assessment of his

boss, peers, or employees; in fact, I ended up conducting my dissertation research on this gap in perceptions.

Most of the participants took the feedback very seriously and struggled to understand it, but our interpretation efforts could proceed only so far, because the aggregated responses from peers and direct reports prevented the participant from knowing exactly who said what, and learning what was behind the comments. The assumption underlying the 360-feedback process—that individuals would only give honest feedback to their peers and superiors if they could remain anonymous—raised troubling issues for me about where we were focusing our efforts in the organization development field. Whether I was interviewing an assembly-and-test worker on the factory floor or coaching a chief executive officer, the questions seemed the same: How is it that everyone seems to have a clear view about what the problems are in an organization, but the employees aren't openly discussing these problems in a forum where they can be addressed? And are those of us in the organization development profession really "helping" by encouraging people to share their concerns via confidential interviews and employee surveys, or are we contributing to the root problem?

When it was time for me to go on the job market, I was torn. I enjoyed university teaching and research, but I also wanted to have a more direct impact on organizations by continuing to do facilitation and organization development. As I explored job options around the country, I spoke to Roger Schwarz, a friend from graduate school at Michigan who was now at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He told me about the Institute of Government, a department of the University whose mission is to improve the lives of North Carolinians by improving the effectiveness of local and state government. He described the department as something of a hybrid: although University-based, much of the teaching, consultation, and writing was directly aimed at assisting public officials and more closely resembled what I thought of as organization development. It seemed like a good fit, and I joined the faculty there in 1992.

Shortly after my arrival, Roger and colleague Dick McMahon were preparing the second offering of their Group Facilitation and Consultation workshop, a 13-day course first offered in 1990. When they told me about their experience with the first workshop, their excitement was palpable; it was clear that they were engaged in an innovative, values-based approach to teaching facilitation that was unlike anything I had encountered to that point. The graduates of that first workshop were meeting quarterly to continue to learn about facilitation and organization development; as I talked with them and heard about their experiences during and since the workshop, I was struck by their motivation and commitment to learning. They were on fire!

I observed and minimally assisted with the 1992 Group Facilitation workshop, but I was primarily a student with the others. This was the integrated approach to facilitation that I had been lacking. Even though I was familiar with Chris Argyris' work, Roger's approach made it "actionable" for me in a way that was completely new. I was able to think back on my various facilitation efforts and use the core values, ground rules, and the way I had defined (or neglected to define) my role as facilitator to begin to identify why some things had been more successful than others. I started using the Skilled

Facilitator approach in my work with government officials, frequently co-facilitating with Roger or other colleagues. Working with another facilitator who was using the same approach, then holding a debriefing session immediately following the meeting or retreat, was a powerful learning combination for me. My husband soon learned that I needed a few hours of “recovery time” after these sessions; I alternated between silence and largely incoherent chatter, as my mind raced with my attempts to put everything I was learning into practice!

A particular challenge for me in learning and using the Skilled Facilitator approach has been to recognize times when I am at risk of unilaterally protecting others, and myself. This has been a lifelong pattern of mine: as the youngest of six children, my role was frequently mediator and peacemaker, with the focus more on smoothing over the conflict than actually resolving it. As I began to teach the Skilled Facilitator approach and give feedback to participants during skill practice, several colleagues shared examples of instances where they had observed me giving feedback differently to people who were really struggling to produce the desired behavior, and they inferred that I was trying to “protect” the person from feeling badly about their performance. Their insights were accurate, and as I reflected on this pattern, I also could see examples of how I had sometimes withheld information from group members when I was a facilitator because of a desire to protect myself; i.e., to try to make sure that the group liked me. With the help of Roger, Dick, Anne Davidson, and other colleagues who use this approach, I began to reframe my view of what it means to be compassionate and supportive, and see that it was not compassionate to protect people (including myself) from information that would allow them to make a free and informed choice to change their behavior. Although some situations still trigger my unilateral protection mode, I find that I can remain effective in circumstances that would have been very difficult for me a few years ago, and that feels like real progress.

The most recent part of my journey in learning the Skilled Facilitator approach has been to practice using and teaching the skills in the role of parent to my children, now eight and four years old. Many people in our workshops over the years have observed, “Wow, my teenage years (or experience in school, or first marriage) would have been so different if I had had these skills back then!” It is my fervent wish that we won’t have to continue to help future generations unlearn ineffective programs for communicating with each other. I feel that one of the greatest gifts I can give my children is to help them understand that we don’t see things the way *they* are, we see things the way *we* are. In the multitude of small teachable moments that comprise a day, I’m trying to help them recognize and test their assumptions, to nurture their natural curiosity about human behavior, to encourage them to share their views and seek out the knowledge that lies hidden in the people they encounter along their own journeys. And of course, as with any good dialogue, I end up learning much more from my children than I could ever hope to teach them.

My son looked at the Ground Rules poster carefully last week and announced, “There isn’t a rule that says ‘No running.’” No, there’s not, Jacob—go ahead and run, and I’ll do my best to keep up.

