

MY PERSONAL JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

SUE MCKINNEY

I started learning to facilitate groups in the mid-80s while working for a non-profit peace organization which made all decisions through consensus. Everyone on the staff had many opportunities to practice facilitating since we made decisions as a staff group of 15, with the steering committee (another group of 15), and at times with all the volunteers bringing the total group number to over forty. Seeking consensus with such large groups, required patient and effective facilitation skills. Agendas were created to meet group members' needs and carried strict time limitations that were only changed with the group's support. I learned to be fast and efficient since reaching consensus with 10-50 people can be quite time consuming. Throughout the late 80s, I developed a reputation for being a facilitator who could get large agendas accomplished within a negotiated time frame, while allowing everyone to be heard, often within the context of consensus based decision-making. I loved facilitating difficult community meetings. I felt confident in my ability to facilitate groups effectively.

In the early 90s, I earned my Masters in Social Work from UNC-CH. During my second year internship, I worked with a county Department of Social Services serving on their executive management team. It was here that I first met Roger Schwarz. Roger routinely facilitated this group of executives and I attended every meeting that he facilitated with the group. I remember being impressed with his approach and the clarity of his thought. I also liked his direct way of addressing issues. So it was with great excitement that I applied to participate in a two-week training course teaching the SF approach through the UNC Institute of Government in 1997, six years after working with Roger in the County government setting.

To my surprise, taking the SF training workshop rattled me to the depths of my being. I entered the class confidently. I had read Roger's book twice, I had worked with him for nine months, and I believed I had strong facilitation skills. I was honestly shocked to discover that I could not quickly understand and achieve the skills required to facilitate consistently with TSF core values. One thing I learned about myself, during this class, is that I have a tendency to rescue others and this tendency was in full force during the class. In one particularly memorable intervention, I attempted to help one group member understand how his actions were being interpreted negatively by the group. Dan was an attorney with a buoyant personality. He was loudly giving team members advice on how to improve their performance. I found the advice annoying and not helpful. But my attempts to share this "insight" with him led me to act unilaterally. With painstaking precision, Dick McMahon coached me step by step through the Diagnosis Intervention cycle. While the intervention was well received by Dan, I had never been so humiliated in my life. I cried throughout the entire intervention.

I left the SF class both enamored with the approach and demoralized at my own inability to facilitate consistently with the model. For the next year, I rarely facilitated groups within my organization and refused any opportunity outside of the agency. I had lost all belief in my ability to facilitate. During that year, I continued to learn about the approach through my friend and mentor, Gail Young. Gail coached me as I attempted to apply the skills in one-on-one conversations within my organization. Later, both Gail and Tom Moore offered me the opportunity to continue my learning by helping teach the skills within their organizations

Through the opportunities provided by Tom and Gail, I observed a four-day SF training event three times in one year. Each time, I marveled at a new insight and gained a deeper understanding of the approach. One of the most important insights came when I realized that I had to be curious and puzzled to make the approach work for me. Up until that moment, I had stayed mostly in a unilateral frame, trying to convince people what a great benefit the core values and ground rules were to groups. I had thought to myself, “who cares what someone else thinks?!” Once I realized that I had a lot to learn from other people, my entire perspective and understanding shifted. From that day on, I became dedicated to the approach and started my journey as teacher.

For more than five years, I have worked hard to master the SF approach and to stay curious about my world and those in it, rather than matter of fact and absolutely certain. Going on this journey has changed me in profound ways, and yet I still revert to my unilateral stance when I feel threatened or upset. Fortunately, now, I recognize that I am being unilateral and can change my behavior (most of the time) in mid-conversation to act consistently with the core values that I espouse.

I took the SF course to hone what I considered my strong facilitation skills. Much to my dismay, I discovered that where I thought I was being helpful, others saw me unilaterally rescuing them by discounting their own ability to manage the situation. Where I saw myself as efficient and quick, others saw me as unilaterally controlling the meeting pace and participation. But because I saw value in the concept of being consistent with the values I believe in, I willingly continued the journey of self-reflection and developing a mutual learning approach to life. It hasn't been an easy path, yet I'm glad that I found myself on it. Through the SF approach, I have become a more compassionate person with a true interest in how others see the world and what I can learn from them.