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Group Facilitation's "Golden Age"

Sandor P. Schuman

A golden age is a period in a field of endeavor where great tasks were accomplished.¹

Which period should we characterize as the "Golden Age of Group Facilitation?" Perhaps the late 1940s and early '50s when Lewin, Bradford, Benne, and Lippitt focused on individual and group development, incorporated a role that we would recognize as "group facilitator," and developed an enduring institution in the form of the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science. Or perhaps the late '50s and '60s when Emery and Trist developed participative planning methods that led to the development of the Future Search. Or the mid-'60s which saw the development of the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA).

Perhaps group facilitation's "Golden Age" took place in the mid-'70s and early '80s when Jones and Pfeiffer published the *Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators (1972-1981)*² and *Group and Organization Studies: The International Journal for Group Facilitators (1976-1981)*.³

Arguably, group facilitation's "Golden Age" occurred throughout the '80s and into the '90s when investment in, and development of, computer-based Group Decision Support Systems and Electronic Meeting Systems refocused attention on group dynamics and the value of group facilitation.

I suppose some would say that the "Golden Age of Group Facilitation" took place from the late-'80s into the-mid '90s when the burgeoning growth of Total Quality Management and Quality Circles saw widespread training of group facilitators.

Others, no doubt, would say the "Golden Age" occurred in the mid- and late-'90s with the formation of the International Association of Facilitators,⁴ establishment of the Usenet Newsgroup *misc.business.facilitators* and *The Electronic Discussion on Group Facilitation: Process Expertise for Group Effectiveness (Grp-Facl)*,⁵ and the appearance of this

publication, *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal*.

It was on a Sunday morning in January, the concluding day of the 1996 IAF Conference in Dallas, Texas. I surveyed the room, eyeing the round tables arranged for meetings for each of IAF's organizational Task Forces. I joined the one with the sign that read "Research and Publications." Mark Fuller, Beret Griffith, Dan Mittleman, Margaret Runchey, and Jean Watts were already there. Seated around the table, we traded ideas and schemed about conducting a survey of group facilitators,⁶ publishing a newsletter,⁷ and creating a journal.

I was *not* in favor of the journal. "Why do we need a journal," I asked, "when there are already so many that are pertinent to group facilitation?" I ticked off a few: *Group Dynamics*, *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Small Group Behavior*, *Small Group Research*. "Why yet another?"

The answer, as I recall, was twofold. For one, IAF wanted a journal to legitimize "group facilitation." "We want a journal to help put us 'on the map.'" It was a matter of professional credibility, which a journal could help establish. For another, IAF wanted a journal that group facilitators would actually read, that they could identify with, that they knew was written for them. As Mark Fuller, *Group Facilitation's* first Editor-in-Chief, put it, the purpose was to "create a lasting repository of knowledge of use to facilitators" and for "examining the 'science' side of the 'art and science of facilitation' ... in a format that would make the results useful to real facilitators rather than just academicians" (Fuller, 1999, p. 3). With a better

understanding of the mission, I signed on, first as Associate Editor, and since 2001, as Editor-in-Chief.

Ten years and eight issues later, I hope we have achieved our purpose, at least in part. During that time I have had the privilege of working with many people who have been crucial to our success. *Group Facilitation* has been served by Editor-in-Chief Mark Fuller; Associate Editors Jean Watts, Daniel Mittleman, James Spee, Edward Ruete, Michael Sabiers, Stephen Thorpe, and Steven N. Pyser; Managing Editors Margaret Runchey, Jon Jenkins, and Tammy Adams; Book Review Editors Beret Griffith, Lynda Lieberman Baker, Scott Gassman, and Andrew Rixon; Copy Editors Linda (Sunny) Walker and Ronnie Seagren; Design Editor Vicki Wharton; Publisher Bill Staples; more than 100 reviewers; and most essential, more than 100 authors. In the coming year, Stephen Thorpe, who has served as Associate Editor the past two years, will take over as Editor-in-Chief, while I support the transition as a Consulting Editor.

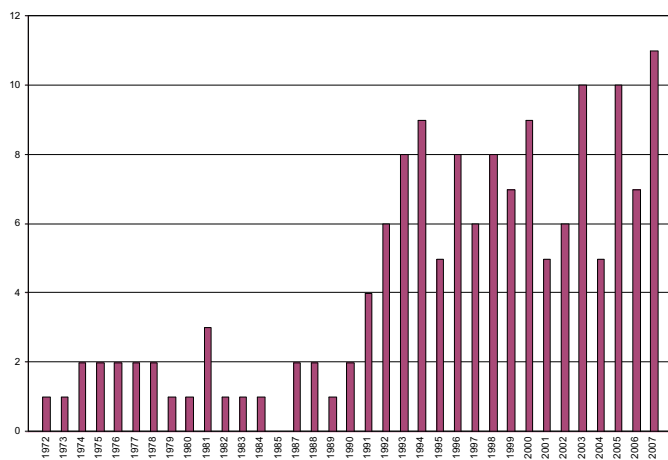


Figure 1. Number of books on group facilitation published per year from 1972-2007.

Over the past ten years we have seen significant growth in group facilitation. As shown in Figure 1, there has been a steady and remarkable increase in the number of books on group facilitation published each year. ⁸ As shown in Figure 2, since its inception in 1994 with 73 charter members, IAF has grown to nearly 1500 members (in more than 63 countries). And as shown in Figure 3, from its initial start in 1995 with perhaps a couple dozen members, the *Electronic Discussion on Group Facilitation: Process Expertise for Group Effectiveness (Grp-FacI)* has grown to average nearly 1,000 subscribers (in 37 countries).⁹ Further, it has been joined by sister lists in Spanish and French and at regional levels.

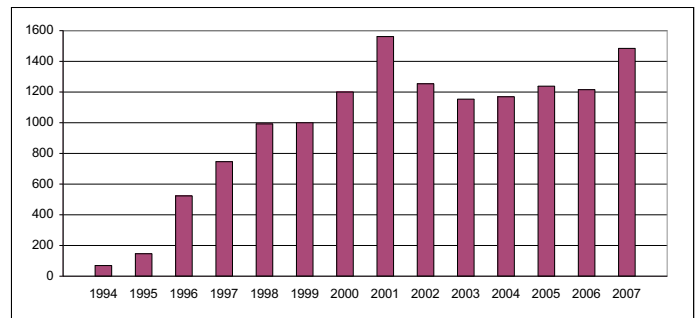


Figure 2. Membership in the International Association of Facilitators by year.

While there is good evidence that group facilitation is growing, many questions remain. Which methods are more effective than others and which is the best to use in a given situation? What is the best way to balance group development and task performance? How can we evaluate the effectiveness of group facilitation comprehensively, both short- and long-term, and document its value? Which technologies support groups well and how can we design them to work better? What is the relationship

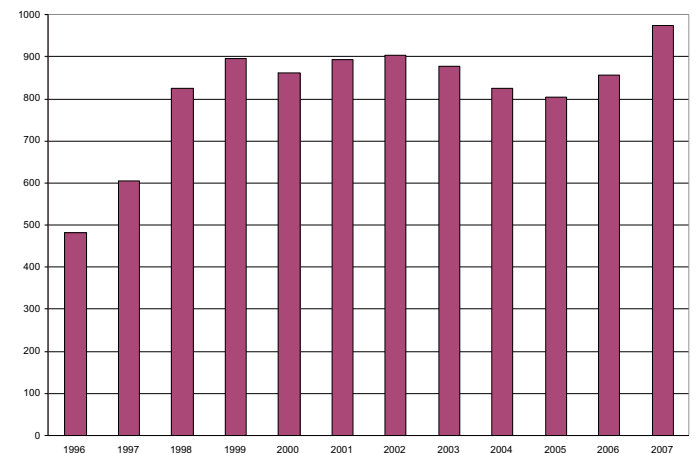


Figure 3: Average number of subscriptions per year to The Electronic Discussion on Group Facilitation: Process Expertise for Group Effectiveness (Grp-FacI).

of group facilitation to collaboration, organization development, dialogue and deliberation, public participation, action research? How can we better integrate group facilitation with experiential learning, intra- and inter-organizational effectiveness, project management, community development, social change, corporate and government efficiency? What can we learn from, and what can we contribute to, social psychology, group dynamics, interpersonal communication, social cognition, personal development, judgment and decision making? How can we address the most technically complex and dynamic problems with the most socially and politically diverse groups? What

factors will further the adoption and diffusion of facilitative behaviors throughout groups, organizations, communities, and society?

With all those questions before us, I think the “Golden Age of Group Facilitation” is yet to come! And I am looking forward to Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal being a central part of it.

REFERENCES

Fuller, M. A. (1999). Facilitation research: Broadening organizational thinking. *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal*, 1(1), 3-4.

NOTES

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- ¹ Wikipedia. Retrieved 12/13/07 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Age_%28metaphor%29.
- ² The series continued to be published through 1983 as the *Annual for Facilitators, Trainers, & Consultants*, through 1994 as the *Annual: Developing Human Resources*, and since then in two *Annual* volumes, *Training and Consulting*.
- ³ The journal continued to be published through 1991 as *Group and Organization Studies: An International Journal*, and since then as *Group and Organization Management: An International Journal*.
- ⁴ IAF was established at a networking conference in Alexandria, Virginia, in January, 1994. For more information on the history of the IAF see Griffith, B. E. and Watts, J. (1998). *A Chronological History of the IAF: A Look at Our Origins*. Retrieved 12/18/07 from <http://iaf-world.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3348>.
- ⁵ The Usenet Newsgroup, *misc.business.facilitators* was established in 1995 and combined with the new *grp-facl* email list in 1996. The newsgroup was discontinued in 1999.
- ⁶ *The 1996-1997 Survey of Group Facilitators* was published by IAF in 1998.
- ⁷ The IAF's *Facilitation News* was eventually replaced by its current newsletter, the *Global Flipchart*.
- ⁸ I searched *Books in Print* [www.booksinprint.com] and amazon.com and supplemented the resulting list with books on my shelf. I do not claim this search to be exhaustive or objective. Many factors could bias the results. For example, older books on the topic might be no longer listed, authors do not use the term “group facilitation” in a standard way, and some books that do not use the term are nonetheless about “group facilitation.” Despite these reservations, I think these results reflect a long-term trend.
- ⁹ Subscription data for the first year of *misc.business.facilitators*, are not available. Data for years 1996-2007 were generated by Listserv[®] and subject to errors resulting from “bad” email addresses that could not be processed automatically. I believe the numbers are correct within ten percent.