The Handbook for Working with **Difficult Groups**

How They Are Difficult,
Why They Are Difficult and
What You Can Do About It

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Exhibit I.1
When to Use an Outside Facilitator

A group member can effectively perform the role of facilitator in many situations. This is especially true when group members have attended facilitator training and gained some experience. Nonetheless, periodically the question arises, "When should we bring in a facilitator who is not a member of the group or perhaps even not a member of the organization, or who has some particular type of process expertise?" Another way of thinking about this question is, "How difficult will it be for this group to work effectively, what type of difficulty will they encounter, and will bringing in an outside facilitator be justified?"

Building on the conceptual framework described in this chapter, we could systematically assess the group's situation on each of the twelve conditions. The guide that follows is less ambitious, providing some guidelines using only the four perspectives of the Competing Values Framework—the relational, political, empirical, and rational perspectives—without differentiating between context, process, and structure.

Considerations from the Relational Perspective

From the relational perspective, thinking about distrust, bias, and intimidation can provide useful insight into the challenges faced by the group and the potential value of an outside facilitator.

Distrust or Bias

In situations where distrust or bias is apparent or suspected, collaborating groups should make use of an impartial process expert to facilitate (and perhaps convene) the group.

Those whose job it is to manage the process, such as project leaders, bear an enormous influence on the process, and potentially the outcome. Their decisions—such as the choice of participants, analytical methods, social interaction methods, and agenda topics and tasks—have fundamental influence on the group's collaborative efforts. To give this power

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Exhibit I.1

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to anyone who has a stake in the outcome gives that person potentially more power than the others. Consequently, the other group members might view such leaders as biased, steering the process in some way to favor their own ends. This might be true, but even if not, it might be perceived as such. A facilitator who does not have a stake in the outcome is less likely to be perceived as being biased.

INTIMIDATION

The presence of a facilitator can foster the participation of individuals who might otherwise feel intimidated.

In situations where participants are of disparate educational, social, or economic status; are at different levels in organization hierarchies; or are in other types of control relationships (such as clients and service providers or small businesses and government regulators), some participants might feel intimidated and be disinclined to participate. Often the presence of a facilitator provides participants with a neutral-status person to whom they can direct their comments more comfortably. The facilitator is skilled in eliciting information in a nonthreatening way, thus fostering productive conversations. However, in some situations, the presence of intimidation, distrust, or bias might suggest that private or anonymous information collection is appropriate.

Considerations from the Political Perspective

From the political perspective, rivalry between individuals and organizations, and the degree to which the problem is well defined and widely shared, can be useful indicators of the difficulties to be encountered by the group and the contributions an outside facilitator might make.

RIVALRY

Rivalries between individuals and organizations can be mitigated by the presence of an outside facilitator.

Participants are often reluctant to exhibit personal rivalries or attacks in the presence of an outsider. They might realize that their claims might not seem valid when viewed externally, and so do not even raise them. Participants are often surprised at how polite they are to each other. When rivalries surface, a facilitator can work with the group to determine if they are relevant to the task at hand, and if not, whether the group can refocus on its stated purpose. When rivalries are germane—either to the task at hand or to the long-term development of the group—the facilitator can assist the participants in understanding them as part of the issues to be addressed collaboratively by the group.

PROBLEM DEFINITION

If the problem situation is poorly defined, or defined differently by different parties, an impartial listener and analyst can help the group construct a complete, shared understanding of the problem.

When people come together with disparate views, they are often more concerned with having their own point of view understood by others than they are in gaining an understanding of others' views. A facilitator can guide the group through listening, analyzing, and summarizing each point of view; help members understand and learn from each other; and work with the group to create a shared understanding of the problem.

Considerations from the Empirical Perspective

From the empirical perspective, the information demands that the group must face, and the degree to which the group is practiced at integrating that information for the particular type of problem at hand, are important concerns.

HUMAN LIMITS

The depth and breadth of substantive issues may be so great that to think about them and the group's process issues is too much for any person to think about all at once.

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Exhibit I.1

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The demands of attending to the content—the volume and complexity of the substantive information—in addition to the group process issues that come into play at each moment in a collaborative meeting may be too much to expect a single human being to meet. Our cognitive capabilities, though great, have limitations. Running a meeting and participating in a meeting are each sufficiently demanding tasks that in complex situations, we ought to focus on one or the other. Having a facilitator whose attention is focused largely on process issues can be a relief to group members, who can then attend more fully to the content issues.

COMPLEXITY OR NOVELTY

In complex or novel situations, the group should bring in facilitators who are familiar with and have process expertise for those types of situations.

Meta–decision making—that is, making decisions about the problem-solving and decision-making process—is a legitimate specialty in which experts can accumulate a wealth of knowledge, expertise, judgmental capability, and practical skill. Although groups often have developed their own expertise for addressing recurring decisions, when approaching novel situations or tasks that they encounter infrequently, such as strategic planning, it might be valuable to call in process experts who work with that type of problem frequently.

Considerations from the Rational Perspective

From the rational perspective, the efficient use of the group's key resources—time and money—are important considerations.

TIMELINESS

If a timely decision is required, as in a crisis situation, the use of a facilitator can speed the work of the group.

For example, if all the metadecisions were made by the group—considering alternative process scenarios and carefully planning each

meeting—it would take valuable time away from treating the substantive issues they want to address. Unlike parliamentary procedure, for which there are prescribed rules that address nearly every procedural issue that a decision-making group can encounter, there is no widely accepted rule book for collaboration. Groups are faced with either making up the rules as they go along or using the rules of the process expert as a "collaborative parliamentarian" who will choose which procedures to apply, make up new ones as appropriate, steer the group through their application, and explain them as needed.

COST

A facilitator can help the group reduce the cost of meeting as a barrier to collaboration. When the participants find it difficult to get together, either because of the cost of travel or other obligations, use of a facilitator can reduce the cost of collaboration. By vesting responsibility for process in the facilitator, the group reduces or eliminates the time it has to spend on metadecisions, makes use of more effective methods known to the process expert, and takes advantage of the facilitator's attention to helping the group accomplish its goals.

Although these considerations are not exhaustive, they do provide some assurance that you are thinking about each of the four perspectives when considering whether to bring in an outside facilitator. The following summary is intended to help you assess each of these considerations. Higher ratings suggest that the person in the role of group facilitator should be clearly differentiated from that of participant or that an outside facilitator (someone who is not a member of the group or organization) should be engaged.

Note: Earlier versions of this assessment guide appeared in "The Role of Facilitation in Collaborative Groups" by S. Schuman, 1996, in C. Huxham (Ed.), *The Search for Collaborative Advantage,* London: Sage; and in "What to Look for in a Group Facilitator," by S. Schuman, 1996, Quality Progress, 29(6), 72.

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Exhibit I.1

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When to Use an Outside Facilitator

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

interpersonal trust   **DISTRUST OR BIAS**   suspicion

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

low status differential   **INTIMIDATION**   high status differential

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

low competition   **RIVALRY**   high competition

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

well defined,   **PROBLEM DEFINITION**   poorly
held in   differently
common   defined

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

low demands   **HUMAN LIMITS**   high demands

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

simple or   **COMPLEXITY OR NOVELTY**   complex or
familiar   unfamiliar
situation   situation

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

no rush   **TIMELINESS**   pressure to
                                                                               solve quickly

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

easy to   **COST**   difficult to
get together   get together