

# **The Guiding Beliefs and Assumptions of Effective Facilitation**

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Most of us go about our daily work, whatever might be, without reflecting upon beliefs, values, and assumptions, which underlie our actions. We move through the world with an internalized set of beliefs and yet, we act upon them without much thought. As facilitators, it is important to realize that often the same is true of our facilitative interactions with groups; that is, we rarely make explicit or consider in any depth, the beliefs, assumptions, and presuppositions that influence the group's or our own behavior.

Many of us learned facilitation through models, by watching, working with or reading about our mentors—the wise and seasoned individuals who acted as our role models. Thus, we do the things our mentors taught us to do without much questioning why they did (and we do) it in a particular way. How often before we enter a pre-meeting session, a critical meeting interaction, or a training effort, do we ask ourselves, "What are the underlying beliefs that are guiding our facilitative actions? Or "What are the group's implicit presuppositions and beliefs about their outcomes, relationships, etc?"

There seems to be little question that beliefs are powerful. They are the invisible factors that guide and direct our research, theory building, our practice and our lives! They are the "behind the scenes" forces that influence our verbal and non-verbal behavior as facilitators. And those behaviors in turn impact the beliefs and perceptions and the behaviors of those we "facilitate". Thus, the combination of these facilitator and individual beliefs and behaviors jointly influence the overall group's behavior which directly affects the quality and success of the group's outcomes. Indeed, this is a powerful interaction, and yet our beliefs (presuppositions, assumptions, criteria) are rarely considered a priori and explicitly by us as practitioners, researchers, and, more importantly, as human beings.

By its nature, facilitation, like any human interaction, is a belief and value-based process. Therefore, as a facilitator it is important to be aware of our own beliefs and to be able to recognize and utilize the power of other's beliefs, as well. The listing and description of guiding beliefs and assumptions that follows in this paper is our attempt to make explicit our underlying beliefs about people (human behavior), communication, and change. They are our conceptual foundation for thinking about facilitation and thus direct our attention and interactions as facilitators. We present them here for your consideration as a catalyst for you to examine your own beliefs about people, human behavior, communication and change and the implications of such beliefs on facilitating effective group interactions.

The list below describes the most important beliefs and assumptions that we, in our collective experience, believe must be operating when one works with or facilitates groups/teams. The beliefs and assumptions documented here were drawn from our

experiences and our philosophies about teaching and working with people. They are also gleaned from a core knowledge base of human behavior, neurolinguistics, and communication. The following core beliefs are used as the basis for model building, designing and facilitating groups and meetings.

## **CORE BELIEFS AND ASSUMPTIONS**

### **Beliefs about Human Behavior and Systems**

1. THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY.
2. HUMANS ARE GOAL-SEEKING ORGANISMS.
3. PRESENT BEHAVIOR REPRESENTS THE VERY BEST CHOICE FOR THE PERSON.
4. EVERY BEHAVIOR HAS A POSITIVE INTENT BEHIND IT.
5. IT IS USEFUL TO MAKE THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN BEHAVIOIR AND SELF.
6. MIND AND BODY ARE PART OF THE SAME CYBERNETIC SYSTEM.
7. WE DISCOVER THROUGH DOING... NOT BY TALKING ABOUT IT.
8. PEOPLE CAN ACCOMPLISH MORE (make better decisions, excel, etc.) WHEN THEY ARE EXPERIENCING POSITIVE INTERNAL STATES OR EMOTIONS.
9. BE SUCESSFUL, YET NOT “ONLY” SUCCESSFUL!
10. THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS FAILURE, ONLY FEEDBACK.
11. THE POWER OF SYSTEMS.

Now that you have seen the list, we will briefly define and discuss each belief more fully. Step in and try on each belief as you read the descriptions below. Is this belief a generalization that you hold true about the world, people, and human behavior? If not, think about what your own belief is and how it is the same and different than the beliefs we have listed here. Here we go! Enjoy the journey....

- 1. The Map is not the territory.** People experience the world differently. Each of us creates a representation of the world from the information we take in through our senses; that is, we create a map or model we use to generate behavior. There is a difference between the world and our experience (our map) of it. Yet this map determines to a large extent what our experience of and actions in the world will be. Thus, our map directly influences the choices we make. In other words, our ability to do things (behavior) is a function of these internal representations or maps.

“...It must be remembered that the object of the world of ideas as a whole (the map or model) is not the portrayal of reality- this would be an utterly impossible task- but rather to provide us with an instrument for finding our way about more easily in the world.” H, Waihinger, *The Philosophy of As If*, p. 15

- 2. Humans are goal-seeking organisms.** We are all motivated by moving toward something we want or by moving away from something we do not want. Or we do both simultaneously in order to reach a goal or outcome. The brain is like a honing mechanism. It is always trying to accomplish the positive and avoid the negative outcomes represent in it.

An effective facilitator will act as a honing mechanism for the group, keeping them focused on their outcomes. If obstacles or problems arise, the facilitator focuses the group on what they want instead of the obstacle, on how they might get their desired outcome, and on finding the resources they need to acquire or activate the outcome. Facilitators use a process called Outcome-Directed Thinking to maintain this focus. (See Outcome Paper, Bostrom and Clawson, 2003.)

- 3. Present behavior represents the very best choice for the person.** Present behavior represents the very best choice for the person at that point in time. We behave in the best way we know how in any point in time, given who we are, what our life experiences have been, our present level of awareness and the choices we believe are available to us at that given moment.

Resistance to change is, therefore, inevitable. Accept and utilize resistance by creating a climate where it can be expressed. Continued resistance is a sign of our own inflexibility. Resistance to change is an indication of limited choices. Thus, the focus of change is to add more choices to people's maps of the world. The person or system with the most choices (flexibility) will be the controlling or most influential element in the system.

- 4. Every behavior has a positive intent behind it.** It is important to make the distinction between positive intent/outcome of an individual's behavior and any particular behavior whose value may be questioned. As a facilitator, you want to focus on the positive intent not the behavior. In other words, look for what is the positive message in the negative behavior.

- 5. It is useful to make the distinction between behavior and self.** Behavior is what we say, do or feel at any moment in time. Self is more elusive. It's something that can not be represented easily in language or by moments of behavior. Self is greater than anything we will ever consciously comprehend.

It is, therefore, very important for the facilitator to help make the distinction between the positive worth of an individual, which is reflected in the positive intent behind their behavior, and any specific behavior whose value is questionable. An effective facilitator respects the positive worth of each individual. For example, if one's behavior in business leads to a failure, it does not mean the person as "self" is a failure; it means the behavior they employed

did not bring about the business result they had intended. Remember separate “what people do” (their behavior) from “who they are” (their self/essence).

- 6. Mind and body are part of the same cybernetic system.** Actually in writing this we have violated what we believe! There is no such thing as mind and body as separate entities; they act as one, they influence each other in such a way that there is really no separation.

Emotions, physiological responses, perceptual input, internal processing and behavioral output occur simultaneously and through time. Each influences the responses of all the others. None is separate and without impact. Thus, when you construct an internal representation of a future communication, like an upcoming meeting or discussion with your boss, how you imagine that interaction will in fact impact your behavior, perceptions, and emotions during the actual exchange. It is difficult for the mind to know what is “real” and what is not. So if you imagine something will go badly (or will go well), the mind will gladly take you there in reality. We respond according to our own internal representations or our internal expectations of what will happen.

It is also important to remember that your behavior, perceptions and emotions can influence another person’s perceptual input. We have the potential to enter into someone else’s cybernetic system and impact their experience at any given moment in time as well as through time based on their stored internal representations/memories of the experience.

- 7. We discover through doing—not by talking about it.** Learning is maximized when we have already had the experience that relates to what we read, imagine, or hear about. Facilitators must convert the abstract to the more concrete experiences which people can reference internally or in their own experience.
- 8. People can accomplish more when they are experiencing positive internal states/emotions.** Challenge, fun, playfulness, cooperation, and celebration are powerful universal states which contain multiple resources. Creating and utilizing these states facilitates obtaining any outcome. Studies have indicated that people are more creative, less stressed, more willing to share accurate information and more open if they are working in positive states or emotions. Facilitators can help set the context for these states with their own behavior and by providing the structures and activities that encourage these resourceful states.
- 9. Be successful, yet not “only” successful!** Success is a useful and appropriate experience. It is the celebration of our hard earned efforts. Yet success can also be an obstacle because it can keep us from noticing other things and learning new ways of doing and behaving. Confusion is “unprecedented opportunity”. It is a signal that something does not fit or it does not make sense. Confusion gives us a

chance to learn something new. An effective facilitator helps set the stage for the celebration of successes, as well as for the “openness” to confusion and to new learnings.

- 10. There is no such thing as failure, only feedback.** Every response can be utilized as information to enhance or readjust behavior and improve the system. Use the evidence of not reaching an outcome as feedback about what to do differently rather than using it to fall into the depths of “failure”. Constructive outcome-directed feedback helps us try something else, to be flexible and persistent, to continue to move towards our outcome using this new information.

For example, you and your car interact with the road. If you receive information visually, auditorally, or kinesthetically that you are too far over into another lane, you immediately use this information to change the direction to where you want to go and continue your journey. You do not stop driving when you get this feedback. You adjust and keep moving on.

When you are working with a group, use the same feedback system. Take in the feedback information and adjust yourself and or the group to where you/they want to go next. Don’t stop driving... instead of dwelling on how you/group failed, use the feedback in a positive way to continue on the journey. Consider feedback as your north star...always there to light and guide your journey-- to help you get where you want to go.

- 11. The Power of Systems.** If you don’t like someone else’s behavior, change your response! We are apart of the larger system. If you change one part of the system, the rest of it has to respond in some way. The bottom line is you can not change someone else’s behavior, but if you change the way you respond to that behavior, the other person might respond in a different way as well. As we have said before, the person or system with the greatest flexibility in behavior will “control” the system.

### **Beliefs about Communication and Human Interaction**

1. LANGUAGE IS A SECONDARY REPRESENTATION OF EXPERIENCE.
2. THE MEANING OF YOUR COMMUNICATION IS IN THE RESPONSE THAT YOU GET!
3. THE HIGHEST QUALITY INFORMATION IS BEHAVIORAL.
4. YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND ANOTHER PERSON VERBALLY; EXTERNAL BEHAVIOR IS ALL YOU REALLY HAVE!
5. THERE IS A CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS MIND AND BOTH CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS COMMUNICATION.

These are our five core beliefs about communication and human interaction. A more explicit description of them follows next.

- 1. Language is a secondary representation of experience.** Much to people's surprise, language is not experience. Language is a model of our experience. Words are nothing more than arbitrary labels for something we have seen, heard or felt... they are the models of our experience and are a secondary representation of that experience. The meaning of a segment of language—a word, a sentence, etc—is the sum total of the individual's ( reader's, listener's) experience of the thing or activity that word represents to them. Words do not mean anything without the experience that is associated with them.

The primary usefulness of language is that it allows us to describe and share our real world experiences and frames of references. However, the quality of these descriptions may vary greatly. Some words are very low quality. They are ambiguous, have multiple meanings, and may be interpreted in different ways, like the word “productivity” or “meta-programming”. Other words are what we call high quality. They have clear, precise meanings. They are generally interpreted in the same way, like the word, “fire” or “snow”. If a person does not ask for more specifics when presented with low quality works, he or she must choose a precise meaning from their own experience (map of the world). If their choice does not match the sender's experience, then miscommunication has taken place.

- 2. The meaning of your communication is in the response that you get!** Communication is not about what you intend to say or even about saying the “right words”. Rather, communication is about creating an experience for and getting a response from the listener. It is about building linkages or bridges between our map of the world and someone else's map and about creating a shared experience in the process.

Language is merely an attempt to explain our internal experiences of communication. In other words, language is a set of arbitrary labels for what we see, hear and feel on the inside. Language is our attempt to move the inside, out. The key to communication is paying attention to the “response” it elicits for the listener. Thus, the real meaning resides in the response side of the interaction.

For instance, when gathering information from the group, you might use a lot of questions and precise queries, e.g. “What about that issue specifically bothers you?” Or “How would you do this, precisely? Your intention may be to gather accurate and shared information or to demonstrate your curiosity and interest. Yet the receiver of your message may respond by becoming defensive and feeling pressured to “give up” too much information. Therefore, the meaning of your communication would be “I want to elicit defensiveness and apply pressure” rather than “I am curious and interested.”

Understanding that the meaning of your communication is in the response is an important underlying assumption for facilitators. Communicating meaningfully in a group requires even greater awareness due to the multiple maps or experiences operating in the room. As facilitators we are responsible for ensuring the message is received correctly or that the meaning the listener makes of the message matches the sender's intentionality. Effective facilitators pay attention to the way they communicate and take responsibility for their own communication, as well, as help others pay attention to their own communication and take responsibility for their own messages.

- 3. The highest quality information is behavioral.** Example: If the gas gauge on your car says "empty", it is a representation that there is no gas. Reality may be otherwise. It may be a faulty gauge. The gauge is the secondary representation of what is in the tank. Looking in the tank to "see" how much gas is actually there is a higher quality representation of "empty".

The facilitator needs to watch for behavioral cues. Much behavioral information during communication is unconscious. A facilitator can help the individual or group maintain the highest quality information by bringing appropriate behavioral cues into the individual's or group's conscious awareness.

Listen to what people say they want, but watch how they behave. The words or language are the secondary representation, while their behavior is what's really "in the tank"!

It is not enough to say "I have changed" or "I understand". The evidence of the change must be behavioral. You must be able to see, hear and feel the change. There must be concrete evidence—what the person is doing to demonstrate the change.

- 4. You cannot understand another person verbally; external behavior is all you really have!** The only thing you get from another person is their external behavior. Your knowledge of their internal states (emotions, etc) and processing is derived from your own internal processing of their external behavior (their voice tone, posture, facial expressions, etc). Language, however, allows us to describe and attempt to share our internal experiences and maps, even though we cannot totally understand another person verbally.
- 5. There is a conscious and unconscious mind and both conscious and unconscious communication.** Are you aware of what is going on in your toes at the moment? You probably were not, but you are now! Consciousness is a threshold phenomenon, information moves in and out of consciousness, e.g. awareness of your toes. Yet the information is always there. Consciousness is a signal of what you are currently paying attention to—what you are aware of at that moment. What you are not aware of is unconsciousness. Our conscious

awareness or processing capabilities are limited. Psychologists over the last fifty years have shown that the number of pieces or chunks of information that the conscious mind can most comfortably handle at any given time is  $7\pm 2$ . That isn't very many!

Repeated behavior that successfully achieves a deserved goal becomes habituated. These habituated patterns are usually carried out unconsciously, i.e. with little or no conscious thought. Individuals, therefore, who acquire knowledge and continually apply it, become very proficient at some tasks and tend to lose conscious awareness of what they know and how they do things. They are what we call "unconsciously competent". That is to say, as we learn a task we are very conscious of what we are doing (remember when you first learned to ride a bike or drive a car?). But when we become very experienced at the task, we start performing it unconsciously. For example, we consciously carry on conversations or observe the countryside while we are driving the car. The complex tasks involved in driving the car have become so habituated that we carry them out without our conscious awareness. This process is, however, absolutely essential for us to carry out complex tasks. Because of the limited conscious processing capability of the human system this ability to become "unconsciously competent" is necessary for us to carry out the multiple tasks of our daily life.

The bottom line is simply that we have both powerful conscious and unconscious processing capabilities (minds) and they are *not* in conflict with each other. We must learn to utilize and balance both modes of processing. Conscious processing is aimed at learning new things and gathering information; while unconscious processing is focused on integrating information and accessing necessary information to act effectively. Traditional statements such as "I need to sleep on it" and "I will get it if I don't think about it" highlight the importance of unconscious processing.

The distinction between unconscious and conscious processing is critical to understanding the communication process. Incongruent communication is the result of the conscious and unconscious minds having different views on the subject. For example, a person may say "yes, I buy that" while shaking their head from side to side indicating "no" at the same time. Or a person may be angry without being aware of it—yelling out the words of agreement. In these situations, it might be appropriate for the facilitator to bring conscious awareness in order to work out the conflict and reach an agreement. What a person is conscious of is reflected in their words or language and what they are unconscious of is reflected in their non-verbal behavior.

## **Beliefs about Change**

1. PEOPLE ARE VALUABLE RESOURCES AND HAVE, AT SOME LEVEL, ALL THE RESOURCES THEY NEED TO ACCOMPLISH WHAT THEY WANT.
2. ALL PEOPLE, GIVEN THE TOOLS, NOT ONLY WANT TO, BUT WILL LEARN AND CHANGE.
3. YOU CANNOT JUST CHANGE THE CONTEXT, PEOPLE MUST CHANGE THE WAY THEY PERCEIVE THE CONTEXT.
4. THE LAW OF REQUISITE VARIETY.

The last four beliefs are our generally held truths about change. Descriptions of these belief statements are discussed below. Remember to try them on and see how they “fit”!

- 1. People are valuable resources and have, at some level, all the resources they need to accomplish what they want.** Our job as facilitators and teachers is to help make these resources accessible and useful to the people we facilitate and teach. For example, if you can talk with friends but not “public speak” with a large audience, you might imagine and see, hear and feel your audience as your “friends”. You already have the resource of connecting to one human being—your friend. In a large audience you are just using that resource in a different way!
- 2. All people, given the tools, not only want to, but will learn and change.** Growth and change is the normal direction of life asserting itself. Learning is our pathway. Many times useful change is blocked because we do not have the “know how” -- the ability or appropriate skills -- that the change demands. As facilitators, we can help provide the framework, skills and tools to set the context for useful change.
- 3. You cannot just change the context, people must change the way they perceive the context.** Changing organizational or individual contexts by implementing new systems, changing structures, etc. will not be effective in changing people’s behavior unless people change the way they perceive or think about the context, e.g. change their maps or meanings about the change.

For example, a facilitator may affect one meeting by alternating how it is structured and the rules under which it is conducted. However, this will not create enduring change for the group unless the facilitator also affects how the members perceive each other, the group as a whole and the meeting context as an important and valuable resource.

- 4. The law of requisite variety.** In any system (e.g. humans or machines) the element or person in the system with the widest range of variability (choice) will be the controlling element. “Control” in this context is the ability to influence the quality of your own and other’s experience in the moment and through time. If what you are doing is not working, try something else. There is an amazing thing about people: When they find something that doesn’t work, they tend to do that same thing harder! This creates frustration, not choice. Choice is better than no choice. The focus of useful change is always to add choices, never to take them away. You only have choices!

## SUMMARY

Beliefs are the larger frames and generalizations that guide what we hold as true about the world, our organizations and each other. They are the powerful forces that guide and influence our behavior. If we believe that facilitation is a belief and value-based process, it is essential for us as facilitators and teachers to examine our own beliefs and to help others make their beliefs -- both those that limit and enhance our interactions- explicit.

Don Shula, one of the great NFL coaches, spoke to the importance and power of beliefs in both coaching and in life,

*“ If you’re going to be good coach , you may have to set aside temporarily the fascination with game science and look first at what is true for you. What are your beliefs? This is such an important, first priority question that I would say your long – run success depends on your answer... Beliefs are what make things happen. Beliefs come true. Inadequate beliefs are setups for inadequate performance. And it is the coach’s – the leader’s – beliefs that are the most important; they become self-fulfilling.”*

So think about it, do you have the answer to “What are your beliefs?” **Remember what you believe and value drives you .... You see what you believe!**