Helping Collaborative Groups Get Real

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One of the key characteristics of successful collaborative groups, particularly when parties are trying to resolve difficult issues, is authenticity. As a facilitator, I work to encourage participants to be authentic, to express their real thoughts, questions, emotions, and concerns—while still being respectful of one another.

In too many groups, the incentive and the group norm is to do just the opposite. Particularly when things get tense, there is often a tendency to just go through the motions, to act "collaboratively" while skirting the real issues. I often refer to these sorts of meetings as "Kabuki Theater," where everyone has their mask on, and a stylized role to play. The resulting atmosphere in the room is often one of guardedness, resignation, and—ultimately—cynicism about the process.

One way out is for someone to take a risk and act authentically; to express their natural human frustrations, fears, and questions. In other words, to be real. This can mean expressing values or emotions that won't be well received by others at the table. (The facilitator or mediator must sometimes re-frame the message in a way that the response to it helps the group move forward.)

In a recent conversation with my colleagues at the center, I was reminded that the response to that first act of authenticity can make all the difference. If it is ignored or responded to with embarrassment, it will be even more difficult for others to express themselves authentically.

It therefore takes courage to be authentic in these settings. To be real is to be vulnerable. Paradoxically, this willingness to be vulnerable can be highly powerful; it conveys to others a sense of self-confidence and also communicates a sense of trust in the others at the table. And as Ostrom, Gambetta, Balliet, and others writing about collaboration point out, that kind of trusting behavior often begets trusting behavior in return.

But there are also powerful disincentives to contend with, my colleagues remind me. Someone at the table who represents a federal or state agency, for example, may rightly feel that expressing true emotions—even if they are positive—may not be supported by those higher up in the organization. Others representing an organization with a previously stated position may be guarded in their statements or behaviors when compromise positions are discussed.

How does one deal with those very real constraints? The conclusion among many of my colleagues is that there is a positive effect in simply stating the difficulty of one's position; for example, "Here are the constraints that I have within my agency," or "I'm not sure how my agency will react to this proposal, but I am willing to explain why the rest of the group supports it." This communicates two things to the rest of the group: (1) the speaker is being clear and transparent about their limits and constraints, and (2) by doing so they are bringing the conversation back to reality, and saying in effect, "I take this discussion seriously." It is taking off the mask, or at least acknowledging that it is a mask, and helps others to do the same.

I believe, however, that there is something else that adds to the powerful impact of authenticity. To be "real" is to allow our common humanity to emerge. We step out of our mask, our appointed role, and become human. And this

common humanity binds us, despite our differences, and creates a mutual affiliation that research shows also builds trust and facilitates agreement.

Recently, I was facilitating the discussion of a collaborative group that was meeting for the first time. While introducing herself, one of the participants broke down while describing the challenges that her special needs daughter faced. She was somewhat embarrassed at her own show of emotion, but it completely transformed the group, allowing other members to feel safer being real themselves. The group soon demonstrated a cohesiveness rarely seen in so short a time.

Years earlier, I was facilitating an important bi-state discussion of about 25 stakeholders regarding sediment management issues in the Columbia River. The group was co-convened by the two governors' offices, but members had a long history of extremely acrimonious relations. The first day of discussion went fine, but one got the feeling that not much of consequence would change.

At the beginning of the second day, to the surprise and shock of all participants, I approached the podium with my guitar in hand. Days earlier, in a fit of inspiration, I had composed a humorous and somewhat bawdy song in which various key participants in the group were described in less than flattering terms. And although I thought some people might appreciate the humor, my better professional judgment said, "Don't sing this to the group!"

My better judgment lost. And so the day started out with my singing a song that might well have offended key participants. But a strange thing happened. The song got a rousing reception, broke some of the tension, and nobody laughed louder than those lampooned in the song. And at the conclusion of what proved to be a highly successful and productive day of negotiating, these people who had at times been bitter enemies all wanted their picture taken together. One person later said, "We've been fighting each other for more than a decade, but we've made more progress these last two days than we have for the past 10 years."

I'm not suggesting music or bawdy humor as a facilitation technique. But the lesson I learned is that music and laughing together humanized the entire process. The tension went out of the room, and people were able to get down to business. Recognizing their common humanity enabled them to take off their masks. They were ready to have an authentic conversation.