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THE UNSUNG HEROES OF A DELIBERATIVE PROCESS: REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF FACILITATORS AT THE CITIZENS' PARLIAMENT

Max Hardy and Kath Fisher, with Janette Hartz-Karp

Facilitation is regularly explained in group-dynamic training sessions and guidebooks, but for experienced practitioners it is often as much an art as a craft. It is one thing to know what a facilitator should do, that is, remain independent while balancing equally important elements: the group process, the task at hand, and the individuals involved. However, knowing what one should do cannot capture the social intelligence and quick wit needed when actually facilitating. The following conversation between one of the lead facilitators (Max Hardy) and the coordinating facilitator (Kath Fisher), with final comments from the other lead facilitator (Janette Hartz-Karp), captures elements of the experience of facilitating at a relatively large-scale and logistically complex process—the Australian Citizens' Parliament (ACP).

The Ecology of the Facilitation System at the Citizens' Parliament

MAX: There are many different facets of facilitation we could explore. Let's start with the layers or structure of the facilitation "system", necessary in a large deliberative process with 150 participants in one room, seated at twenty-three tables of six to seven people each.

KATH: As I saw it, there were four layers of facilitation: (1) the *lead facilitators* (Janette and you); (2) my role: the *coordinating facilitator*; (3) the *floor walkers*,

who listened to what was going on at the tables and reported to me what they were noticing, which I would then report to you or Janette; and (4) the *table facilitators* who worked with the participants. There was another layer or process, the *debrief*, which I facilitated, when the table facilitators came together and reflected at the end of each day. You came to most of those debriefs, didn't you?

MAX: I did, and then often took messages to Janette, Carson, and others if the table facilitators felt something needed to be changed or an action needed to be taken. How did we come up with that system?

KATH: Janette had suggested the system of lead, coordinator, and table facilitators, from her experience with other 21st Century Town Meetings. I think I decided that floor walkers would be important because it was going to be too hard for me to cover the entire floor alone. So we had two, sometimes three other facilitators who observed the tables. They were responsible for eight to eleven tables each. The floor walkers communicated to me through walkie-talkies, much more efficient than physically crossing the room to talk. Messages included issues like tables not being able to hear at the back of the room or needing more time for their conversations. I would then speak with the person who could resolve those issues.

MAX: How do you think that overall system worked throughout those challenging few days?

KATH: Really well, I think, in large part because of the table facilitators. We had a lot of experienced people who mentored those who were inexperienced. They came to the daily debriefs with very clear and thoughtful reports and reflections on what was happening at their tables, which helped us understand the issues arising. I found it was better to communicate those issues directly to you rather than Janette, who needed to maintain the overview of the whole process and not be caught up with too much detail. Can you think of an example where that information helped the system of co-leadership?

MAX: Yes. Janette always knew what had to be done by when, and even though we were referred to as co-lead facilitators, I think we had very different roles. Janette kept everything on track, with an eye on the end point of the process as it was designed. You and I were more involved at the table level, and I think we both sensed that we needed to look after the table facilitators as well as the participants. We needed to honor what the citizens were saying because we wanted that experience to be rich and worthwhile for them. I remember there were a few occasions when the design changed