

The Art of Training: Co-Facilitation

By R. Wade Younger

Fruition Consulting believe that co-facilitating a group is one of the most important and helpful steps in becoming a professional trainer. Even after one has gained proficiency in leading groups, co-facilitating is superior to working alone. This article will discuss some major advantages, some potential disadvantages, and some suggestions for avoiding problems in co-facilitation.

ADVANTAGES

Facilitating Group Development

One of the most convincing reasons for working with a colleague, as a co-facilitator is to complement each other's styles. One person may have a group-dynamics focus while the other may have an intra-individual focus. Together they may be able to monitor and facilitate individual and group development better than either of them could separately. So as a senior facilitator, never get caught up trying to change another trainer's style.

Dealing with Heightened Affect

In some groups (e.g., personal-growth groups or team building), highly emotional situations may arise, and the facilitator must be able to deal not only with persons who have a heightened affect but also with the "audience effect." It is difficult to help an individual to work through deeply felt reactions and, at the same time, to assist other group members in integrating this experience in terms of its potential learning. In such a situation, it is always advantageous to have a co-facilitator. One facilitator can "work with" the person(s) experiencing significant emotions, while the other facilitator assists the other participants in dealing with their reactions to the situation. If you ever had a student attempt to "hi-jack" your seminar, you know how useful this can be.

Personal and Professional Development

Co-facilitating offers each partner support for his or her personal development. Facilitating can be a lonely activity; the opportunities for meaningful personal development are lessened by the complexity of the facilitator's monitoring and intervening tasks. When there are co-facilitators, each can better work his or her personal-development issues both in and out of the group setting.

Another major advantage of co-facilitating is the opportunity for professional growth. Participants usually are not able to offer meaningful feedback on facilitator competence. When facilitators work together, they can provide each other with a rich source of professional reactions. In this way, each training experience becomes a practicum for the facilitators involved. Remember iron sharpens iron.

Synergistic Effect

The remark that "two heads are better than one" often has been validated experientially in consensus-seeking tasks. When people work together collaboratively, a synergistic effect often develops. That is, the outcome of the deliberation exceeds the sum of the contribution of the individuals. Co-facilitating can generate synergistic outcomes through the personal and professional interchange that results from working toward a common task.

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Modeling

One way in which participants learn in training is by studying facilitators as behavioral models. Co-facilitating provides not only two models of individuals coping with their own life situations, but it also offers a model for meaningful, effective, two-person relationships. The interaction between the co-facilitators gives participants a way to gauge dyadic relationships. The likelihood that the training will transfer to the participants' back home, everyday situations is increased.

Reduced Dependence

A recurring issue in training groups is the problem of dependence on the facilitator. Facilitators who work with many groups alone sometimes dread having repeatedly to face participants' unresolved authority conflicts. With co-facilitators, the leadership is shared and, therefore, the dependence problem is dissipated somewhat.

Appropriate Pacing

A facilitator can pace himself or herself more effectively when working with a partner. Observing and intervening in a group session are demanding, and the facilitator sometimes is not able to relax enough to permit the process to emerge at its own rate. However, co-facilitators can check each other's timing of events and provide some respite from the detailed monitoring necessary to provide meaningful interventions.

Sharp Focus

A final advantage is that issues can be focused more sharply when they are seen by two facilitators. Facilitators usually have "favorite" issues that are likely to emerge in their groups, and co-facilitating can offset biases.

POTENTIAL DISADVANTAGES

Different Orientations

Some dangers are, however, inherent in co-facilitation, and it is necessary to be aware of potential problems. Individuals with different orientations—theoretical, technical, personal—can easily impair each other's effect in the group. It is, for example, difficult to imagine a good melding of a Tavistock-oriented "consultant" and an Esalen-trained facilitator. Such partners would likely discover themselves working at cross-purposes.

Extra Energy

Co-facilitating takes energy. Not only are the facilitators occupied with the development of the participants and of the group, but they also have to expend effort to develop and maintain the relationship that may be pivotal to the success of the training. The training sub goals include not only the facilitators' personal and professional development, but also their relationship with each other. That's why it is very important to check you ego at that door, it can be a definite drain on your partner.

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Threat and Competition

Because two professionals in a group may constitute more of a threat to individual participants than one would, they may see co-facilitators as colluding with each other. The “clinic” sessions that co-facilitators engage in between training sessions can arouse suspicion and create an emotional distance between the facilitators and the participants. Co-facilitators can become competitive with each other, too. Although they may deny any concern for popularity, they may, perhaps without knowing it, engage in behavior that meets other needs besides those inherent in the training.

Overtraining

It clearly is possible to “overtrain” a group, particularly with the presence of two active facilitators. It is important to recognize that too many interventions may stifle both participation and learning. This is especially true if facilitators play the “two-on-one” game, simultaneously attempting to interpret and facilitate one participant. Group-member helpfulness is one of the most potent dimensions of group training events. After an initiation period, participants—as well as facilitators—can make meaningful interventions. It is important that the facilitators stay out of the way in order to permit this to occur.

Blind Spots

Co-facilitators may have mutual blind spots in observing inter- and intra-individual dynamics, and it is possible to reinforce each other’s failure to attend to particular areas. If co-facilitators are similar in their theory and technique, it is quite likely that they will pay attention to the same data. Thus, they may neglect (or pay less attention to) other data, thereby increasing the possibility that they will fail to notice significant learning opportunities that are outside their normal purview.

A Misleading Model

In any human situation, there is the possibility that people will react to assumptions rather than to clear understandings of one another. This, of course, can occur with co-facilitators if they are not clear about each other’s positions on recurring and predictable group issues. In this event, they can provide an ineffective model for the participants. When the relationship between co-facilitators is tense, mistrustful, and/or closed, the modeling is negative. Participants may mistakenly conclude that what “works” in human a relation is to behave in ways directly opposed to the values on which the trainer’s behavior is based.

Different Rhythms

A final potential disadvantage in co-facilitating is that the facilitators’ intervention rhythms may be different. One may intervene on a “beat” of ten, while the other intervenes on a beat of three. The facilitator who is slower to react or who hesitates in the hope that the participants will take responsibility for the maintenance of the group may find obtrusive the partner who intervenes more rapidly. Disjunctive contacts that may result between the co-facilitators provide a negative model for the participants.

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AVOIDING THE DANGERS

Facilitators who are considering joining together to work with a group can engage in a number of activities to obviate these potential disadvantages. The obvious first step is to share orientations to and experiences with similar kinds of group situations.

A second way of avoiding the problems of ineffective co-facilitation is to solicit feedback frequently and regularly. As a check on behavioral perception, there is no substitute for honest and straightforward reactions. In order to counteract one facilitator's tendency to overtrain the group and to cut into the rhythm of interventions of the other, it may be useful to count to ten—or twenty—before intervening. If any participant speaks during that time, the count is begun again at zero.

It is important that the co-facilitators be honest both in presenting themselves and in soliciting feedback from participants. In this way, they can de-emphasize the impact of their presence in the group. Each co-facilitator needs to monitor the reasons for his or her behavior in the group. Each intervention should be "located," that is, the facilitators need to know what they are observing, what they are responding to, what the needs in the group seem to be, and what the intervention is designed to elicit. Otherwise, it is likely that the intervention will meet the personal needs of a facilitator at the expense of the needs of the participants.

Testing Assumptions

It seems axiomatic that all assumptions need to be tested continually. Facilitators clearly are not above making errors in communication. It is critical that they check the bases of their professional judgments. If co-facilitators experience difficulty in working together, they may solicit a third party as a consultant. This activity can produce a great deal of learning not only for themselves but also for any observers.

Personal Awareness

In confronting the potential disadvantages of co-facilitating, partners can create for themselves opportunities to experiment with and to enlarge both their personal development and their professional expertise. The following inventory can help facilitators to become more aware of their assumptions, preferences, and motivations in facilitating groups.

Learning Style: (Write a brief statement to explain your concept of how people learn.)

Personal Motivation: (Complete the following sentence: I am involved in training because . . .)

Expectations: (What things do you expect to happen in the type of group in which you will be working? What would be the best thing that could happen? What would be the worst thing?)

Intervention Style: (What are your typical responses in the type of group in which you will be working?)

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Here are some other examples:

1. When starting the group, I usually . . .
2. When someone talks too much, I usually . . .
3. When the group is silent, I usually . . .
4. When an individual in the group is silent for a long period of time, I usually . . .
5. When someone becomes upset or cries, I usually . . .
6. When someone comes in late, I usually . . .
7. When someone introduces outside information about family or friends into the group, I usually . . .
8. When group members are excessively polite and unwilling to confront one another, I usually . . .
9. When there is conflict in the group, I usually . . .
10. When there is a group attack on one individual, I usually . . .
11. When group members discuss sexual feelings about one another or about me, I usually . . .
12. When I am running overtime or behind schedule, I usually . . .
13. If there is physical violence, I usually . . .
14. My favorite interventions in this type of group are:
15. My typical "intervention rhythm" (fast/slow) is:
16. My style characteristically is more (a) nurturing or (b) confronting.
17. The thing that makes me most uncomfortable in groups like this is:
18. Other information about me that might be useful to a co-facilitator (e.g., FIRO-B scores, social style, NLP preference, training/learning style, etc.) is:

Coordinating with the Co-Facilitator

In planning to co-facilitate a training event, there are several things that trainers can do to enhance the process. The first is to establish a personal connection with each other for at least an hour to share information and expectations. This includes sharing responses to the inventory in this section, discussing professional experiences, and explaining what personal issues each anticipates working on in the group. It is a very good idea to state some of your co-facilitation patterns and to indicate the behaviors that your co-facilitator might see as idiosyncratic. It also would be helpful if each of you were to note issues that have arisen in your past work with other facilitators.

When you have shared this personal information, it is time to define together the training goals of the event on which you are about to work; to reach consensus about the expectations and experiences of the participants; and to discuss your reactions to the makeup of the group, its size, and any other special considerations. Then work to reach an agreement on the following issues.

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Operating Norms

1. Where will each of you sit during the sessions?
2. When presenting and not presenting?
3. Who will open and end each session?
4. Are there differences in status between you? If so, how will this be handled?
5. How will it be presented to the participants?
6. Will there be open-ended or specific time periods for starting, breaks, etc.?
7. Will you end at specific times?
8. What are your preferences for attendance for yourselves and for the participants?
9. Will either of you be free to leave the group or just stay part of the group during all sessions?
10. How (and possibly when) will you make theory inputs, and which of you will do what?
11. How will you work to facilitate transfer of learning and back-home application?
12. Will there be follow-up and, if so, how will it be done?

Co-Facilitating Style

1. Where, when, and how will you deal with issues between you?
2. Can you agree to disagree? How much tolerance is there for differences?
3. Will you encourage or discourage conflict?
4. How much of your behavior will be role determined and how much will be personal and individual?
5. Is it possible to use each other's energy; that is, can one of you be "out" while the other is "in?"
6. How will you establish and maintain growth-producing norms?
7. What is not negotiable with each of you as a co-facilitator?

Ethics

1. What are your responsibilities if someone in the group has psychological difficulty?
2. Are you responsible for referral?
3. What responsibilities do you have after the training experience is over?
4. What responsibilities, if any, do you have for screening participants?
5. Are you adequately qualified?
6. How will you communicate your qualifications to the participants?
7. What are your ethical standards and typical corrective measures with regard to issues such as sexuality, prejudice, and so on? (In the U.S., offensive communication based on sex, race, religion, age, disability, or country of origin tends to be prohibited by law.)
8. After sharing information and discussing it, it might be a good idea to take a break in order to review and consider the information that you have received from each other, and then meet again to discuss any items that need clarification.

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Clinics

“Clinicking” is the term that Fruition uses for the brief, “how-are-we-doing, what-should-we-consider-changing” meetings that co-facilitators have during the breaks in a training event and at the end of each day. Some of the questions that you may want to ask are as follows:

Diagnosis

1. On a scale of one to ten, how did things go in this session?
2. What is happening in the group(s)?
3. Are there any problems that need to be addressed? If so, what are we going to do about them?

Soliciting Feedback

1. What did I do that was effective?
2. What did I do that was ineffective?
3. How am I doing as a co-facilitator?
4. To what degree are we colluding, that is, not sharing all the information we have?

Renegotiation

1. As we re-examine our contract, do we find anything that we ought to renegotiate?
2. How are we feeling about each other?
3. What is each of us going to do in the next session?

Finally, it is important to have a debriefing session at the end of the training event in order to conduct a final clinic and to discuss what happened, what was or should have been done, and what each of you learned from the experience. The following questions may be helpful at this time:

1. To what extent were the training goals achieved?
2. Under what conditions would we work together again?
3. What are our personal and professional learnings from this event?
4. What can I do personally to improve my training competence?

Facilitation is an art that should be developed over time, very much like a skilled pianist. No one expects us to just walk up to a Baldwin Grand and perform Beethoven’s Piano Concertos No. 4. What is expected is a serious period of time that is used for diligent practice, preparation and patience. View the art of facilitation, whether it’s “co” or “solo” in the same matter, an ability to effectively disseminate information that enhances human development. Strive to touch the heart, evoke thinking, and stir emotion. This will move your audience to action every time!