



L2 Emergence

A Facilitation Story

Sylvie Lapointe – April 29, 2009

One fine fall day I was sitting in my office feeling a bit discouraged. I had been leading a major culture change initiative in a federal government department that had been very successful to date but we were hitting a few bumps in the road. I was reflecting on how I could transform the resistance to change we were facing from the “old guard” in the organization from opposition, to curiosity, and eventually to support for a new way forward.

Just at that moment, the phone rang. It was Rodrigo. He had just come back from a month long trip to South America. Before he left I had asked him to bring me back a rock, from the most impressive place that he had visited. He told me that he picked up a rock from Torres Del Paine in the South of Chile for my collection. His voice was very animated as he described the awe struck feeling he had when he saw the mountains, these monuments of nature.

Rodrigo worked for a federal government department. He had taken part in a two-day session that I led for the inaugural meeting of their newly created departmental task group. Since then, the team’s leader invited me to work with his group on several occasions.

The newly appointed deputy minister had launched a department wide initiative to create more horizontality and collaboration amongst the sectors. This objective was to better position the department to strategically inform and influence national and international agendas in their field of expertise. The department assembled an Implementation Task Group that brought together some of the best and brightest minds from all sectors of the organization. The Task Group’s job was to develop a new policy framework for the department, in just six months. It had been a roller coaster ride for these guys. The Task Group spent long days and nights developing the new framework and now, as they were moving towards implementation, they faced strong resistance from the culture they were asked to change. Rodrigo, as part of this Task Group, confided that the work I did with them at the outset had a significant impact on their cohesion and work as a team.

What did I do you ask? I spent time helping them develop relationships. I learned something precious from Paul Lefebvre, a friend and colleague who is a professional coach. Coaching teaches us that there are three types of conversations: a conversation for relationship, a conversation for possibilities, and a conversation for action. I don’t know about the organization you work with, but in most organizations, we spend the vast majority of our time in action. We run from one fire to the next with little or no time to ask ourselves if there are better ways to snuff out fires, or even better, to reflect on what caused the fires in the first place and how to prevent them! The theory goes something like this: if you do not take time to build relationships, there may not be strong commitment for your course of action. As well, if you do not take time to look at new possibilities, your actions may be lacking imagination and creativity.

I designed an agenda that followed the three levels of conversation. The first day focused on *relationships*. I led team members through a personality type inventory exercise. Participants got some insight into what “made them tick” and discovered how their skills and talents could complement those of their colleagues.

We then moved to the *possibilities* conversation. They worked with a tool called Appreciative Inquiry, developed by David Cooperrider, and I asked them to interview each other. Participants told their interviewer a personal story about a time when they felt truly engaged and especially proud of what they had accomplished as part of a team. The positive attributes that emerged from these stories became the basis for the team’s vision and values statement.

Finally, we launched into *action*. I used an Interview Matrix process to develop a team charter. Every member of the team had an opportunity to give input into the team’s ground rules, protocols, decision-making processes, and conflict resolution processes. We finished the session with a “Next Steps” piece. I asked the question: “What do we need to do when we go back to the office in order to keep the momentum going?” We listed actions, along with names and timelines. We closed the session by doing a “check-out” that gave everyone the opportunity to share with others what he or she was taking away from these first two days with their new team.

This team was under a lot of pressure to produce a key policy document and propose a new approach to doing business, in a very short time frame. I believe that the time the leaders chose to invest in building relationships at the start of this project allowed them to navigate the sometimes-choppy waters of teamwork in less than ideal conditions. The vision and values statement and the Team Charter became a compass when the weather got rough and the drive to get things done overshadowed the human element of teamwork. The work we did in that two-day session, when the team was created, helped a group of strangers become a team through open communication. Trust was built as they learned about each other, defined what they stood for, and determined how they wanted to work together to accomplish their vision.

If I have learned one thing in my career in facilitation, it is that we need to go back to basics: facilitate the building of relationships between people.

No matter how you look at it, an organization is simply a group of individuals working towards a common goal. An organization is only as strong as its employees and the relationships existing between employees.