

GETTING THE WORDS OUT OF THE WAY

by Carl Nettleton

Communicating about public policy and business issues is a challenge. We all use words that we think mean the same thing to other people, but don't. The words get in the way of our ability to move forward together.

In the Dr. Seuss book, *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish*, author Theodore Geisel writes:

*Say! What a lot of fish there are.
Some are sad. And some are glad.
And some are very, very bad.
Why are they sad and glad and bad?
I do not know. Go ask your dad.*

"SOMETIMES THE WORDS GET IN THE WAY BECAUSE THERE ARE NO VISUAL CUES TO TELL THE STORY."

Geisel's fish with multiple colors and moods reminds me of the diversity of people in groups where decisions are made about how to move from the present reality to an envisioned future. We think of diversity as cultural, ethnic, or as other socially defined differences in people. Diversity also includes differences in perspective, thinking, emotion, mood, and perhaps the wiring that genetically drives our actions. Sensitivity to these differences often requires a skilled facilitator.

A facilitator is much more than a flip chart operator or meeting organizer. He or she can interpret values and differences, map competing or collaborative visions, and serve as a high-level problem solver and trusted ambassador between the parties involved.

A skilled facilitator has a process to get the words out of the way and achieve a desired outcome. Sometimes the outcomes are predetermined and require

aligning a team to achieve them. Other times the outcome is unknown and the facilitator's task is to help the group determine which direction to take.

Occasionally facilitation takes place in a simple meeting or two. At other times it's a process requiring a number of group and individual meetings.

When an organization or process feels broken or dysfunctional, a facilitator can provide the appropriate strategies to gently work within the structure to discover the cause of the dysfunction.

Is a community group stalled because an unstated quid pro quo can't be achieved? Is a multi-agency collaboration mired down because a funding agency representative doesn't want to give up the leadership role to a new facilitating agency? Does the volunteer leader for a non-profit lack the skills to implement an agreed upon series of steps? The skilled facilitator can provide the processes to uncover and resolve obstacle(s) like these.

Sometimes the words get in the way because there are no visual cues to tell the story. Facilitated mapping is a key strategy that today's facilitators use to resolve issues involving location. They guide the group through the development of an intelligent, interactive computer-based map. Layers of the map could include land use, jurisdiction, ownership, planned restoration or development, public utilities, crime statistics or other parameters to find areas of agreement, conflict, and future collaboration.

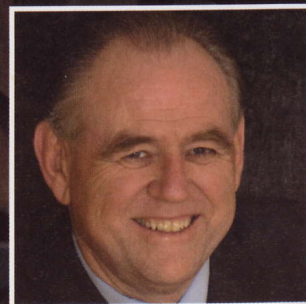
No matter what techniques are used, a facilitated process should include:

- Client pre-meetings to clearly identify expectations and establish a process framework.
- Facilitated sessions with key stakeholders to agree upon the current status, desired outcome, and next steps.
- A clearly written and usable summary that includes what was agreed upon and the next steps.

Some facilitators provide additional services such as one-on-one meetings with key stakeholders, facilitated mapping, and joint fact-finding to develop documents.

A professionally facilitated process includes analysis and insight about the problem and a way to communicate the outcome. Getting the words out of the way using a skilled facilitator not only provides savings in time and money, it improves the quality of the outcome.

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