

# Dynamic Facilitation - a method for culture change

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In this chapter, we are reporting on our work experiences with Dynamic Facilitation in Austria. We are interested in the following questions: What are the specifics of this method? What effects can be observed? What potentials for culture change are present in Dynamic Facilitation and its associated format, the Wisdom Council, as originally developed by Jim Rough?

Based on the Wisdom Council model, the participatory format of Civic Councils (BürgerInnen-Rates) was developed in Austria specifically for public sector applications.<sup>1</sup> Civic Councils are used here at local and regional as well as state and federal levels. When we develop applications based on the Wisdom Council's characteristics for other contexts, such as companies or schools, we use the term "Futures Council" (Zukunftsrat). Dynamic Facilitation can also be applied as a facilitation method within various processes designed for different contexts (such as work team meetings or department meetings) and some of our illustrations are drawn from such instances.

In this chapter, we will primarily be illustrating the effects of Dynamic Facilitation by looking at how it is used within Civic Councils. Our central focus is the question of how Dynamic Facilitation influences culture change, along with, what is required to unleash the potential of this approach to participatory design of shared futures.

## 1. What concerns everyone, needs to be considered by everyone - the era of the great conversation

In addition to our own experiences of working with Dynamic Facilitation and the Civic Council, we also refer to the results of a joint research project on "Sustainability as a Question of Culture" (Haderlapp / Trattnigg 2013.) In that work, we explored some of the obstacles, contradictions, and success factors of cultural change that we will be presenting here.

The crises that we are facing today can only be solved by people working together. An important finding from our research is that we need time and space to explore questions of sustainable policy and sustainable design, where we can jointly explore new answers to existing problems within a respectful atmosphere. We are called upon to challenge current paradigms and stuck patterns, and thus to develop alternative solutions, all within the context of participatory future design processes. These processes are widely applicable not only in communities and local regions, but also in businesses, schools and other organizations / institutions. In addition, they contribute significantly to the growth of a decision-making culture that promotes innovation and sustainable development.

These future design processes do not happen by themselves, but must be consciously initiated and hosted. They require process competence for successful implementation; i.e. knowledge about optimal design and specialized participation methods. From our own practical experiences, we feel that

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<sup>1</sup> Elements of a Civic Council: clients are usually local governmental bodies or public administrators; random selection; 12-16 participants; 1½

the wide range of contributions that these participatory processes can offer toward the sustainability of our communities, merits their becoming more widely known and appreciated, as well as receiving regular financial and institutional support. This is the case currently within the state of Vorarlberg, where the Office for Future-Related Issues regularly conducts state-wide Civic Councils. The data collected to date in Austria on the results of Dynamic Facilitation and the Civic Council show how rewarding this bold and pioneering approach can be, for successfully shaping the future with the support of all involved parties.

One of our research results can be summarized pictorially as follows: After the "end of the age of the great narratives" (Jean Francois Lyotard), as a society we are now on the threshold of the "age of the great conversation", which is comprised of many smaller conversations. To tackle the complex challenges we are facing, it takes all of us. The potential for sustainable and customized design solutions will lead the politics, economies and societies of the future to draw more than ever from the "wisdom of crowds". Thus we need to be co-producing and co-creating solutions, while dedicating significant attention and appreciation to designing processes that allow us to do so.

## **2. On the relevance of the Dynamic Facilitation method for culture change**

What are the aspects of Dynamic Facilitation that make it useful as a method for culture change? We have distilled here what we see as its most valuable elements:

### *A different conversational culture*

Right from the start of a Dynamic Facilitation session, it is necessary to be consciously attending to the creation of an appreciative and open conversational culture. Part of our job as facilitators is to set this tone and to safeguard it. To do this, we need to be listening well to the verbal messages we are hearing, we need to be making those meanings visible on paper, and we need to be preventing other verbal messages from devaluing what has already been said. This requires us to begin with a more "bilateral" facilitation style: as facilitators, we spend more time than is customary with each person, drawing them out through the use of follow-up questions.

It is only after we have "emptied" participants of all of their pre-made opinions, positions, and concerns about others' positions, that it is generally possible to think about something new. (Jim Rough calls this process "purging".) During this bilateral conversation with a participant, other participants usually realize very quickly that they themselves will later be receiving the same kind of attention that this person is now receiving. That observation usually increases the attention and mindfulness of all.

What participants do particularly well within the context of a Dynamic Facilitation session, while hearing the plentiful reflections being offered back to the one who is speaking, is to listen attentively and to take seriously that person and their contributions. Clearly, in our society we feel a great lack of -- or to put it another way, a great longing for -- being perceived as persons with our own thoughts, concerns and proposed solutions.

### *Upward spiral instead of downward spiral*

A significant characteristic of Dynamic Facilitation is that we use a structured moderation process to break through entrenched discussion patterns. In this work, participants usually perceive it as beneficial that we foreground a joint, co-creative development process, instead of a battle of wills between one set of arguments against another set of arguments. Dynamic Facilitation thus stands in stark contrast to standard patterns of discussion which are often about winning or losing. By means of active and appreciative listening, along with the invitation to repeatedly empathize with other points of view, we are able to initiate a solution-oriented culture of conversation. Innovation-hampering phrases such as "That will never work," or "We've never done it that way before," are welcome in the Dynamic Facilitation processes as concerns, yet they are never allowed to stand alone without a follow-up prompt ("Can you say more about what it is that you are fearing?") along with a further question (such as, "Great! So in that case, what would *your* solution be?") The dynamics of a Dynamic Facilitation process could be described using the metaphor of a ping-pong game as follows: in this way of playing, the goal is *not* to force your opponent to make a mistake, by returning the ball with as tricky a spin as possible; instead, the goal is to work together to keep the ball in play.

### *From the surface to the depths*

Verbal messages are not simply left standing, but are instead either reflected back or summarized, as literally as possible. In response to abstract statements, facilitators offer follow-up questions (e.g. "What do you mean by ...?") The additional clarification of rationales or further concretization of what has already been said, usually leads to a better mutual understanding among all participants, and thus to a reduction of the kind of resistance that can quickly arise whenever allegations are allowed to stand without further explanation. By means of invitations to expand one's reasoning and the genuineness of the follow-up questions, it soon becomes evident to all that we are shifting away from a conversational pattern of mere assertions or demands, to a more innovative and constructive dimension of conversation.

One possibility for achieving more depth on a subject is the so-called "decision-makers' question." It goes as follows: "Suppose you had an important decision-making position (e.g. mayor, school director, president, etc.) and everything were possible; that is to say, you had all the necessary means at your disposal. What would you do in this situation? How would you proceed?" This question offers a participant the opportunity to immediately imagine themselves in a powerful position, which usually triggers an intense process of reflection. At such moments, it is important to offer some "sacred time" so the participant can sit quietly with this question. The answers are often surprising, and in many cases focus on finding a solution to the problem through communication. One example: "I would sit down immediately with the relevant experts or citizens, so that together we can get a better picture of the situation, and hear their solutions." Often participants' answers also offer very concrete steps to address

the problem. This demonstrates how frequently people have valuable thoughts on issues. Yet without these kind of processes, they would not have the opportunity to share their comments nor contribute their insights. Participants are usually surprised by how much creativity and knowledge is evident in the outcomes they develop.

### *Self-education rather than instruction*

For Jim Rough, the inventor of this method, Dynamic Facilitation and the Citizens' Council are suitable for tackling the major problems ("dragon problems") and pressing challenges we are facing in our world. For example, the fight against global poverty and climate change, issues that concern and affect many people, could be subjects for a Dynamic Facilitation session. In the course of working with Dynamic Facilitation, it quickly becomes apparent how, on the one hand, participants' own roles or behaviors are contributing to the problem (for example, certain patterns of shopping or voting behavior.) On the other hand, possibilities for handling and designing responses to the situation are also very clearly worked out, named, and anchored throughout the course of the process.

Instead of engaging in a process of mutual blaming, people come to acknowledge their own ways of thinking and acting, which are usually not only individual but also collective in nature. This leads them to develop concrete ideas about how to break or change this pattern. One participant's statement illustrates this aspect of self-reflection well: "We allow ourselves to become too entangled with the media. As a result, we no longer come up with the idea of organizing ourselves around a shared concern." Our research shows clearly that to bring about culture change, we need a change in our mental infrastructure, in our ways of thinking. This is what is catalyzed by Dynamic Facilitation.

The Wisdom Council format, when used for a Civic Council, offers community members an invitation to participate in policy and management. In societies that have long cultivated attitudes of expectation, entitlement, and demands, we see it as particularly important to draw attention to the potential of Dynamic Facilitation for strengthening the energy of self-organization and the capacity for self-empowerment, and to apply this approach widely. Thus, a Civic Council is not about creating a "wish list," but rather about strengthening everyone's self-responsibility and thus also arriving at greater clarity concerning our shared responsibilities. For example, the so-called "joint declaration" that concludes a Civic Council, which is then given to policy makers and public administrators, can consist of two parts: recommendations to policy-makers / public administrators, as well as recommendations to everyone else (meaning the totality of a community) to address the dimension of collective behavior or attitude change.

### *Diversity / heterogeneity as a success criterion*

The random selection that is used in Civic Councils makes possible a very high diversity of opinions and perspectives. At the same time, people who were previously complete strangers to one another, come to recognize a great similarity in their real and existential needs. Common concerns

become visible. After some time, an effect called "perspective taking" can occur. The understanding of one another's position grows, and the idea of what it would be like to "walk in the shoes of the other" is no longer completely absurd. Respect for other viewpoints increases, along with an understanding of different perspectives around a common problem. Perspective-taking becomes the shared foundation for a comprehensive perception of the problem and the basis on which holistic solution proposals are grounded.

It is important to give sufficient space to all of the participants. Some take this space on their own, while others need the support of the moderator. "Still waters run deep;" this proverb takes us a long way in the context of Dynamic Facilitation. Our directed follow-up questions, along with our intentional inclusion of people who are rather reluctant to speak, generally prove quite useful. At the same time, a great deal of tact is required here to not overwhelm people, as well as to avoid any loss of face. However, when we succeed in actively inviting quiet (or quieter) participants for their perspective, often new and surprising aspects come to light and may lead to very productive turns in the flow of the session. Experience shows that much is usually held back in conventional conversation, generally due to the fear of being devalued. This fear is often based on previous negative experiences with a predominantly "hard" culture of discussion. Unusual contributions and unorthodox proposals are therefore not often made. Thus, in our conventional conversational culture, we deprive ourselves of a valuable wealth of ideas. This is illustrated in the following statement from a politician: "It was only through this kind of facilitation that I came to realize how much potential and knowledge is present in my staff, and how much of that does not surface in our everyday interactions. "

### *Learning to think together, developing a We-feeling*

After about an hour of moderating with the Dynamic Facilitation method, in which ideally all participants have been able to speak, there has already arisen a different and highly valuable atmosphere of active, attentive, and respectful listening. Some participants report that after a while, having their own turn to speak no longer mattered so much to them, as the other verbal messages were so interesting. As a result, they had time to follow their own inner processes, or to observe the dynamic events around them. They found that many of their ideas were eventually uttered by other participants, which however caused them no problem. In some cases, they report feeling like all participants were thinking together, even when they were not all taking a turn.

As facilitators, while we are perceiving, listening, repeating, asking, and writing, we are evoking a sense of relaxation in participants that invites them to open up to another level of thinking. This gradually deepens not only each individual's thought process but also the collective thinking of the group, as each person inspires the others. What most notably occurs after a relatively short time of working in this way, is a palpable sense of belonging. A politician who participated in this process described it thus: "In a very brief time, we began to think as a team, beyond the party lines." In a short time, this group experienced a sense of collective action. Together, they contributed to finding solutions,

and were particularly active in ensuring the implementation of the proposals they had developed together.

The contribution that Dynamic Facilitation and the Civic Council can make to the sense of community - or in scientific language, to the social capital - within a community, was impressively illustrated by the statement of a participating citizen: "We came in as an 'I' and left as a 'we'."

#### *Dynamics of focusing on energy and deceleration*

"Go with the energy!" This credo of Jim Rough's shapes a Dynamic Facilitation session; one could also say that Dynamic Facilitation lives from this energy. It is important that energy, even if it is initially expressed in the form of anger, resentment or frustration, can be lived out in a constructive manner through this method. Emotions are quite welcome in Dynamic Facilitation, as they constitute human being's driving force. Behind the anger or the resentment is a passion that wants to be set free. As facilitators, we make sure that those emotions perceived as negative are not directed against any other participants, but instead are passed 'through us' onto the charts where they often turn into a force for innovation.

However, the dynamics of Dynamic Facilitation are also paradoxically located in the deceleration that arises from the process of posing frequent follow-up questions and writing down all the contributions. In other words, it is precisely the deliberate slowing down that also makes possible a different quality of thinking. It is about being able to wait if someone needs to "go inside" in order to develop an answer for themselves. This valuable space for reflection can be described as "sacred time."

#### *Value and importance of concerns*

People with a lot of concerns are frequently viewed within an organization as troublemakers, ones who delay things or prevent innovation. However, within a Dynamic Facilitation session it is possible to give concerns a place where they can be valued and put to good use as a source of innovation. The open invitation to express concerns (one of the charts is specially dedicated to "concerns") begins to diminish their negative image. It also highlights the various concerns that are present with regard to any given solution, and that need to be taken seriously. Most significantly, it allows for concerns to be voiced and made visible. Concerns are also a form of energy, through which the original participant or other participants will be able to further develop a solution, eventually arriving at "Solution 2.0."

In our work with a group of policy makers, it was precisely the conscious recognition of concerns that led to a remarkable insight and thus to a breakthrough in our subsequent work. After about half an hour into the Dynamic Facilitation process, two chart papers were filled of concerns and only a few solutions had been proposed. The topic was an impending decision to either host a Civic Council or else abandon the project. A politician commented on the progress of the meeting as follows: "So far, with regard to this project which is about involving citizens, we have only expressed concerns; and even

our solutions sound like concerns." This self-reflection made it visible to all, how much fear and uncertainty was present with regard to this project. It also led to the conclusion that ultimately, it was the task of the political representatives to overcome their concerns in order to do justice to their political charge of representing the citizens.

### *Gaining new insights*

Now we arrive at the question of what is considered to be a "solution" or an "outcome", within the context of Dynamic Facilitation. In today's materially-oriented culture, our tendency is to mark the completion of a process, by creating measures that are as concrete as possible, with corresponding schedules and responsibilities. This desire is even stronger when the client (for example, policy-makers or public administrators) or the participants themselves have very concrete, material expectations for the process ("Something concrete must be developed and implemented.") To counteract this tendency somewhat, we advocate for a balanced view of the results, one where we value equally the intangible results that are key to the sustainability of a community. These often consist of arriving at different perspectives and modes of thinking, in addition to developing alternative courses of action. To this end, we quote Jim Rough: "Almost more important than the tangible results are the internal processes and developments that are triggered or set in motion within the participants. At first, they may not be so visible nor measurable in an external sense, and it may take some time before these seeds fully develop, the seeds that are sown through the different kind of co-creation that takes place within a Dynamic Facilitation session."

One way to gather insights that go beyond the contributions recorded on the solutions chart, is to inquire about the "aha effect" ("of courses") that arise during a Dynamic Facilitation session. In our experience, this draws out insights that surface the personal development that has taken place. Mostly it becomes clear that there is a great longing for a different kind of conversational culture and for a culture of collaboration, such as what participants experienced within the space of the facilitated session. But changing established patterns is difficult, as was evidenced by the statement made by a local public official: "We endure more than we can bear." She was referring to the conversational patterns that took place in the context of governmental meetings, which she experienced as very stressful. To bring about a change in the conversational situation, this politician resolved to remove the tables from the boardroom in advance of the next meeting. Yet breaks or interruptions of this kind can be difficult to engage in, and require the courage to try something new and unusual.

Another important result of Dynamic Facilitation sessions are the "breakthroughs" which can be experienced as an outcome of an intensive work session. At some point during the collaborative work, suddenly more clarity and mindfulness arises. It is possible to see something that was not visible before; a blind spot is illuminated. In this way, Dynamic Facilitation helps people recognize the deeper issues, reach different levels of thinking and reflecting, and thus arrive at new insights.

### Outcomes of the various aspects described above:

1) The quality of our systems improve, whenever a significant number of people develop an understanding of the complexity and multiple perspectives involved in decision-making processes. As the following statement illustrates, this insight can be experienced in a Dynamic Facilitation process within a relatively short time. A participant in a Civic Council stated: "These were two days of living democracy." The facilitated conversation, the frequent changes of perspective, and the valuing of concerns succeed in stimulating an intensive process of reflection - both self-reflection as well as reflection upon the larger system.

2) Dynamic Facilitation processes are "generative of new possibilities" ("choice-creating.") Due to the innovative culture of dialogue, it becomes possible to think "outside the frame" of an existing system and to challenge current paradigms. This seems especially necessary as the complex issues of our time - to paraphrase Einstein - cannot be solved with the same consciousness that have contributed to their creation. It is therefore culturally necessary that we trust ourselves to take innovative and often unusual opportunities into consideration, and thus courageously open up new possibilities. In the course of the process, people often arrive at a point where they ask themselves, through what patterns and attitudes are they themselves perpetuating a specific problem or maintaining a certain paradigm. In this recognition often lies the key to a solution. Outcomes are highly innovative and suggested solutions are generally implemented without undue efforts. At the same time many of the effects of Civic Councils and Dynamic Facilitation sessions unfold beneath the surface. Often, participants say that after a session, they are seeing many things through different eyes, and are dealing with their environment in a much more attentive way. Considered in terms of culture change, Dynamic Facilitation can lead to a strengthening of personal self-efficacy and to collective changes that are often not recorded in the written outcomes. One participant pointed to this aspect of the process: "Through this shared work, I have become more sustainable. "

3) In many of the solution possibilities and outcome statements, the desire for culture change is evident. Dynamic Facilitation and the Civic Council format allow the expression of the intangible, qualitative dimensions of experience and strengthen them, whenever these outcomes are recognized and accepted as fully equivalent to the physical, quantitative results (for example, a recommendation for building a new school AND a recommendation for developing the "education of the heart".) With regard to the future, what will matter is not so much an increase in the quantitative, material sphere; instead what will be essential for our quality of life will be the intangible, qualitative aspects that are becoming increasingly important. As an example of this, we see the brief formula that was developed in one Civic Council that reads: "In our region, we need more We, less Me." Thus a Civic Council is not only an instrument of applied political education, but also brings about the individual



and collective awareness that is needed for responsible sustainability.

4) The Civic Council and Dynamic Facilitation processes can be understood as an expression of the common good. As elements of the larger field, people bring with them what we call their "representative perception", and act as a mouthpieces voicing impending needs for action. Thus, the Civic Council can be seen as a seismograph: within a short time, it creates a structured overview of the feelings, problems and layers of need. On this basis, tailor-made potential solutions are developed "from the center of the community" (eg, community / region, company, institution.)

5) Through shared work (for example, as part of a 1 ½-day Civic Council) participants develop an inkling of how 12-16 strangers are able to act within a very short time period as a group. This shows the great potential for culture change inherent in this work. Our research makes it clear that this is a future-related competence, which is becoming increasingly more important: the ability to organize ourselves (in smaller or larger units) and to be able to act collectively. Whenever we are successful in doing this, in a context that includes a wide variety of perspectives, then we have taken a significant step forward.

6) The Dynamic Facilitation approach is strengths-based work. People are met where they are. The design of the process invites people in to participate, draws them in, and makes it possible for them to show up "at their best" because no loss of face happens. The process will work with whatever is there. Participants feel comfortable as a result of having their knowledge and experience valued, and as a result often grow beyond themselves. There is no gap between the experts who have the knowledge and the people who need education; instead, it is possible to engage in a productive, solution-oriented collaboration on an equal footing.

7) From our work with Dynamic Facilitation and Civic Councils, we take with us the awareness of a strong longing for deeper, more authentic conversations. The understanding of conversation as a cultural asset and the promotion of a different culture of dialogue are important contributions that Jim Rough has made with his concept of "wise democracy." For this, we need places where we can meet to engage in collective reflection and joint solution development, as we do in Civic Councils. The participants in these Councils often express the desire for more places of encounter where the exchange and pooling of ideas can take place across social boundaries. Specifically, the Civic Council, through the element of random selection, promotes an element that is so important for the social capital of a society: the "bridging" work of understanding and networking across group boundaries. In this context, it is obvious that all perspectives are important and valuable: this arises from the process of working constructively with diversity. Polarities and contradictions are not as disturbing, but instead carry us further, if we succeed in placing these contradictions within a

structured, facilitated process where they are valued rather than belittled, downplayed, or hidden. In our view, this "we-feeling" is essential for the sustainable development of a society and for the building of a culture of relationship.

8) Our experience and research show that policy makers are facing the challenge of a "system breakdown" (in the words of some elected officials.) Participatory approaches have been generating forward movement within the problematic situation that has been triggered by the system of representative democracy, as it has been practiced to date. In the context of a Dynamic Facilitation session within the Salzburg Provincial Parliament (Landtag), moderated by one of the authors, the question of the future role of political bodies was explored from a policy perspective. The concerns that politicians are having about the possible loss of their traditional responsibility of being the deciders, or even of having their role abolished as a result of the increased promotion of participation, are important and need to be taken seriously. At the same time, we also need to explore, What are our new role models? What new understandings of leadership are arising? How can "representation" be lived differently? We strongly support the image of a public official as a host or hostess, making available the times and spaces where we can work together on responding to the questions about our future. In this approach, citizens are encouraged to participate productively. Coming up with a good question and inviting a Civic Council to respond to it (for example, "What are the burning issues that concern us the most?")<sup>2</sup> will put our public officials' policy of openness to the test.

### **3. Time, space and resources for participatory design of the future**

Participatory future design processes such as civic councils in municipalities / regions, or future councils in companies or institutions, are part of a process of continuous improvement. Instead of prescribing something to people, participation exemplifies a new cultural practice, a new 'operating system' of "working from the inside out." To do this, we need to provide appropriate time and space and establish the necessary allocation of resources within political and administrative systems, companies, or institutions. (This often means staff positions or contact persons within companies or departments, such as the Office for Future-Related Issues of Vorarlberg's State Government.) We need people who have the necessary training and knowledge to professionally support participatory future design processes. This capacity-building process could support the cultural change toward "management by design."

The age of the great conversation is characterized by the time, space and resources to make the "wisdom of crowds" visible and usable as a societal potential for designing our future. Social innovations, such as the above-mentioned participatory future design processes, can make a contribution to culture change that is equal in importance to technological inventions. It is therefore advisable to

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<sup>2</sup> The original German expression is literally, "What is burning beneath our fingernails?"

anchor these processes structurally within institutions and to provide adequate funding for them. In this way, they can become a natural part of our expanded repertoire of participatory design process within our political, economic, and societal spheres, and make valuable contributions to the sustainability and quality of life we experience in our communities.