

By Roger Schwarz

The path
to positive
outcomes
can be
counterintuitive.

Becoming a Facilitative Leader

Leaders often help create the consequences they try to avoid. They seek high-quality decisions, but find out that information was not shared with them. They seek commitment from others, but get compliance or resistance. They ask the people who report to them to be accountable and take initiative, but find themselves having to resolve their staffs' problems.

In each of those examples, leaders unknowingly contribute to the consequences they complain about.

What I call The Facilitative Leader approach helps leaders create the consequences they say they want and reduces unintended and unwanted consequences.

Stop and take the quiz at right.

When you took the quiz, you likely did what leaders do all of the time: You applied your values and assumptions about people, groups, and organizations to specific situations, and you selected strategies for dealing with them. If you lead effectively, your values and assumptions enable you to create strategies that have positive consequences without unintended negative consequences. But what if your values and assumptions lead you to generate negative consequences for you, your team, or your organization? And what if the same set of values and assumptions keeps you from recognizing the negative consequences you're creating?

That's where The Facilitative Leader approach comes in. It is a practical, values-based, systemic approach to leadership. It lets you use a clearly defined set of values and assumptions and create strategies that improve the quality of decisions, increase commitment, reduce implementation time, and improve working relationships and personal satisfaction. It enables you to increase positive consequences, while reducing unintended negative consequences. At the heart of The Facilitative Leader approach is the idea that the way you think—your core values

and assumptions—is a significant cause of your effectiveness or ineffectiveness. The strategies and techniques we use are extensions of our values and assumptions. Changing one's strategies or techniques without changing the problematic thinking that generates them is like finding ways to be ineffective.

Undermining

So, how do you undermine your leadership effectiveness? It starts when you face difficult situations that you find potentially embarrassing or psychologically threatening—such as discussing high-stakes issues or delivering negative feedback, including telling your boss concerns about his or her behavior.

In such situations, almost everyone operates from the same set of values as follows.

Unilateral control. You try to control the situation to make sure that you achieve whatever your goal is, as you defined it before the conversation.

Win, not lose. Naturally, you'd rather come out the winner.

Minimize negative feelings. You don't want people talking about how angry they are, especially at you.

You use a set of assumptions, too. You assume that you understand the situation and those who disagree don't. Consequently, you're right, others are wrong. You often question the motives of people with different views, while believing your motives are pure. You see yourself as a steward for the organization, while other people are trying to build their empires or meet their own needs. Consequently, you assume your feelings are justified. You have a right to be angry because others don't understand, are wrong, or have questionable motives.

That combination of values and assumptions causes a leader to design strategies that control the conversation. Leaders with those values and assump-

Take This Quiz

This short quiz will help you identify some consequences of your leadership approach. Choose the answer that best describes how you would handle each of these situations.

1. You need to give some negative feedback to Pam, one of your direct reports. You

- a. give Pam some positive feedback, then give her the negative feedback, and end the conversation with some more positive feedback
- b. ask Pam how she thinks she's doing
- c. begin by telling Pam that you're concerned about some of her actions and that you want to talk about them specifically, ask her what led her to take them, and then together figure out what steps, if any, need to be taken.

2. You're designing a 360-degree feedback system for your organization. To ensure that people get useful feedback, you

- a. ask people to complete the evaluation forms anonymously to ensure honest responses and to send in the forms so that the aggregated data can be fed to the person being evaluated
- b. ask people to bring their completed evaluations to a meeting with the person being evaluated, where they'll discuss the ratings in detail.

3. You're leading a team in which two members, Ellen and Sean, are concerned that another team member, Peter, isn't performing his share of work, which is

making it difficult for the seven-member team to achieve its goals. The two members want you to deal with it. You

- a. meet with Peter privately and let him know about Ellen's and Sean's concerns, without identifying them by name
- b. have Ellen and Sean raise the issue in the full team meeting, identifying Peter by name and asking others, including Peter, what their views are
- c. facilitate a private meeting in which Ellen and Sean can tell Peter how his behavior is creating a problem for the group.

4. Whenever you and your team are solving a problem together, team members stop sharing different views after you express yours. To address that problem, you

- a. tell team members what you've observed and ask what's leading them not to vocalize their different views
- b. ask for team members' views and express your views last
- c. have everyone (including you) write their ideas on slips of paper and discuss them without attaching names
- d. assure team members that you value their ideas and that the team's strength comes from its diverse views.

My answers are 1c, 2b, 3b, 4a. If you're puzzled by some of them, keep in mind that facilitative leadership is sometimes counterintuitive. Read on if you're wondering why my answers differ from yours or if you're curious whether we chose the same answers for the same reasons.

tions don't fully explain their points of view because that might lead others to question and challenge them. A leader with those values and assumptions doesn't ask others to explain their points of view (except to shoot holes in them) because they may consider things that he or she hadn't, which would jeopardize his or her goals. To minimize the chance that people will express negative emotions, these leaders ease in by asking questions or making comments designed to get others to understand what they're thinking without them having to say it. Because they assume that they understand the situation, they act as if their reasoning is foolproof, without bothering to test with others whether their assumptions and data are accurate. They keep private their strategy for controlling the conversation because telling others would foil their strategy.

All of that creates consequences that leaders try to avoid. People can misunderstand each other and become defensive, causing the level of trust to drop. That can hinder a team's ability to learn, its effectiveness, and the quality of work life. Perhaps the most insidious part of the unilateral control model is that one is usually unaware of using it. Fortunately, other people can clearly identify when someone is unilaterally trying to control a situation. With practice, you can, too.

The Facilitative Leader approach generates long-term positive results that unilateral control cannot. Facilitative leadership isn't only for formal leaders; anyone can use the approach. A team's effectiveness can rise dramatically when all of the members learn to use facilitative leadership. It achieves different consequences because it uses different values, assumptions, and strategies.

Core values

These are the core values of The Facilitative Leader approach.

Valid information. To create valid information, you share all of the relevant information you have on a subject. Ideally, the information you share can be independently validated by others.

Free and informed choice. That means that people agree to do things because they have the relevant information and because they believe the decision makes sense—not because they feel manipulated, coerced, or cajoled into it.

Internal commitment. When the first two core values are present, people often experience internal commitment; they do whatever is necessary to implement the decisions.

Compassion. That means suspending judgment in order to appreciate other people's perspectives. It means having empathy for others (and for yourself) in a way that holds people accountable for their actions, rather than unilaterally protecting others or yourself.

As a facilitative leader, you assume that other people may see what you miss and vice versa. You consider differences to be opportunities for learning rather than conflicts to be avoided. And you assume that people are trying to act with integrity given their situations.

The strategies that facilitative leaders use to implement their core values and assumptions are the ground rules for effective groups. For example, you test whether the assumptions you make about others are valid before acting on them. You share all of the relevant information you have about an issue by using specific examples, explaining the reasoning, including your needs or interests, that leads you to favor a particular solution or take some action. You create learning for yourself and others by asking them to identify the things you may be missing. And you raise the "undiscussable" issues that have been keeping the team from being more effective.

The consequences of those strategies

are better understanding, less defensiveness, and more trust. Team members—and you—learn more from each other, which enhances the quality of the group's decisions and its working relationships.

How the quiz answers compare

Let's return to the quiz and consider how your answers to question 1 compare with facilitative leadership.

If you answered a. One key principle of The Facilitative Leader approach—transparency—emerges. That means sharing the reasoning for your statements, questions, and actions. In the first question, many people select *a*—sometimes called the sandwich approach to feedback. The positive feedback is meant to put Pam at ease, buffering the negative feedback for which you called the meeting. Finishing with more positive feedback is supposed to keep Pam from feeling bad or angry, especially at you. But the sandwich approach has unintended consequences. To use it, you need to withhold your strategy—relevant information—from the other person, or the other person almost assuredly has to play along.

To see what happens if you made that strategy transparent, imagine saying, “Pam, I have some negative feedback for you. To put you at ease, I’ll start by giving you some positive feedback. Then I’ll give you the negative feedback—the reason I wanted to talk with you today. Finally, so you don’t leave feeling bad or angry, I’ll end with more positive feedback.”

If that sounds absurd, you recognize the problem: Unilateral control strategies lose their effectiveness when you reveal them. Thinking systemically (another facilitative leadership principle), it doesn't make sense to use a strategy that becomes less effective as more people learn it.

If you answered b. Answer *b* also isn't transparent. If you use the easing-in strat-

egy, you may be assuming that if you give negative feedback directly, the recipient will become defensive. So, you may try to mitigate the defensiveness and potential embarrassment by asking a series of questions, hoping that the person will “get it” without your having to say it.

But asking questions without explaining why you're asking them can cause the person to become concerned and defensive. You, in effect, create the defensiveness you're trying to avoid. To make matters worse, you might think you can't point out that the person is becoming defensive because that would make him or her more defensive. As a result, you prevent yourself from learning how you contributed to creating the defensiveness.

If you answered c. Answer *c*, which uses The Facilitative Leader approach, assumes that people don't need to be protected from negative feedback. By giving specific examples of what the employee did that concerns you, you provide relevant information. By asking how he or she views the situation differently, you assume that the employee may see things you missed. That way, you increase the chance that the two of you will be able to reach a common understanding. Finally, by suggesting the process you want to use for the conversation (and checking for concerns), you make your strategy transparent and the two of you design the conversation jointly. All of that increases commitment to whatever decisions are made.

Valid information, accountability, learning

Regarding question 2, every organization I've consulted to that uses 360-degree feedback has used strategy *a*: Someone receives feedback from his or her boss, direct reports, peers, and customers. Each evaluator completes a survey, sometimes adding comments. Except for the boss's evaluation, the sur-

vey scores are combined so that for each item the employee receives a separate averaged score for peers, direct reports, and customers. The boss usually reviews the survey results with the employee.

People who design such systems tend to assume that the evaluators will be less honest if the person being evaluated can identify the individual evaluators' ratings. But I see several unintended consequences of promising anonymity. Anonymity prevents someone from learning who gave what rating and why. As a result, the person being evaluated can't learn whether the raters are using information he or she considers valid. Without specific examples, the recipient can't learn which of his or her specific behaviors people think need improvement. Although organizations emphasize that performance feedback systems are development tools, it's difficult to develop when the feedback providers aren't available to explain their feedback.

Leaders tend to emphasize that people should be accountable for their actions. Yet, by endorsing performance feedback systems that reduce accountability, these leaders contribute to situations they complain about. If people need to be promised anonymity in order for them to give honest feedback, then the organization has a problem with fear in the workplace. For organizations to excel, leaders must develop an environment in which people can openly provide each other with critical feedback and help each other develop.

Strategy *b* approaches performance feedback using The Facilitative Leader approach. One of my clients—I'll call her Cathy—redesigned her computer company's system for herself after attending The Facilitative Leader workshop. Cathy asked her boss, several peers, direct reports, and internal customers to complete a 360-degree feedback survey. She explained her plan and asked each of them to bring the completed survey to a

Ground Rules for Effective Groups

Test assumptions and inferences.

Share all relevant information.

Use specific examples and agree on what important words mean.

Explain your reasoning and intent.

Focus on interests, not positions.

Combine advocacy and inquiry.

Jointly design next steps and ways to test disagreements.

Discuss undiscussable issues.

Use a decision-making rule that generates the level of commitment needed.

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meeting with her. At the meeting, the group discussed each survey item and stated the rating they gave Cathy and gave some examples to explain what led them to choose that rating.

Because of the new feedback design, Cathy learned of the specific behaviors that people saw in her that were effective and were ineffective. At times when someone shared an example, Cathy remembered it differently. So, the two of them talked and together reconstructed the situation. Having new information sometimes led the evaluator to modify a particular rating. Together, the group, including Cathy, identified patterns in her behavior to work on. Cathy was able to use the group to support her development. Whenever she worked with anyone in the group, she could ask whether she was improving or the person could initiate

the feedback.

Cathy says that the feedback meeting felt risky because she made herself vulnerable. A peer who was part of the feedback meeting says that she also felt vulnerable. She and Cathy both say that the session generated more usable information than any other feedback session they'd been involved in.

Capacity, unnecessary dependence

With regard to question 3, serving as an intermediary between team members (option *a*) creates unintended consequences. One, when you talk with Peter, he is likely to have a different view of the situation than Ellen and Sean. Because you're not Ellen or Sean, you won't have all of the relevant information you need to address Peter's comments and questions. That makes it unlikely the two of you will reach a common understanding of the situation to solve the problem. By agreeing to speak for Ellen and Sean, you reduce their accountability for giving feedback to their team member, and you miss an opportunity for Ellen and Sean to develop their ability to manage their relationships with team members. You also reinforce team members' dependence on you.

With option *c*, Ellen and Sean are talking with Peter. Leaders who use this “praise in public, criticize in private” strategy often reason that the issue isn't relevant for the team. Raising it in a team meeting with Peter may reduce his self-esteem, make him defensive, or erode team trust. But the strategy creates a problem. If Peter's behavior is affecting the team's performance, addressing the issue outside of the team cuts off relevant information that other team members have about the issue.

For example, Peter may agree that his performance is affecting the team, but he

may also believe that other team members are contributing to the problem by withholding information that he needs. Without all members present, the team can't construct a common understanding of what happened and how it happened, and that increases the chance the team won't develop a solution it will be committed to implementing.

In The Facilitative Leader approach, team members are informal facilitative leaders and share responsibility for increasing their team's effectiveness. As a facilitative leader (option *b*), you explain your reasoning for having Ellen and Sean raise the issue in the team with Peter and ask what would prevent them from being able to do that. If Ellen and Sean are concerned that Peter will become defensive, you could coach them on how to use the ground rules to discuss the issue to reduce that likelihood. And you can offer to help facilitate the conversation once they raise the issue. It's OK for Ellen and Sean to let Peter know they plan to raise the issue in the next team meeting so that Peter won't be surprised. Here you act compassionately by temporarily suspending judgment about the causes of the problem and by respecting Peter enough to let him hear and respond to the views of other team members directly, without discounting his ability to respond effectively.

Curious about behavior

Regarding question 4, team members sometimes withhold or misrepresent their views to avoid disagreeing with their boss. When you infer that is happening, you might try to solve the problem unilaterally by assuring your staff that you want to hear their ideas (option *d*), without saying what you've observed that leads you to think the group needs reassuring. Or you might figure that if people can share their views anonymously (option *c*), you will receive more

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honest responses (we've already explored the problems that approach creates).

Many leaders decide to withhold their opinion until others have spoken, assuming that will do away with a silencing influence (option *b*). Yet, if people are concerned about expressing views different from yours, your speaking last doesn't address the root cause; it just changes the strategy of your staff. Faced with not knowing your views, they state their opinions in vague terms so they have enough flexibility to reposition their views after hearing yours. Their vagueness can lead you to think they don't really grasp the situation and don't have much to bring to the conversation.

Facilitative leaders quickly raise the issue with the group (option *a*). As a leader, you might say:

"I've noticed a pattern in our meetings. After I share my view on a topic on which we have different views, no one challenges my opinion or presents a different one. Let me give you a few specific examples.... I'm wondering whether people see the situation differently and, if not, what has led to this happening? I'm open to the possibility that I may be doing things I'm unaware of that shut down conversation. What are people's thoughts?"

By saying that, you raise what was previously an undiscussable issue with compassion and accountability. By explicitly inviting people to say how you

may be contributing to the problem, you heighten the chance you'll learn about behavior you were unaware of. After the group identifies the causes of the behavior pattern, together you can design a way to solve the problem. With facilitative leadership, you don't need to worry whether to speak first or last, because you know that team members' views won't change just because of the order in which everyone speaks.

Becoming a facilitative leader means changing how you think in order to change the consequences you help create—for yourself, your team, and your organization. Like any fundamental change, it takes time and commitment. But it also generates the kind of learning that's essential for the highly effective teams we seek to create. **TD**

Roger Schwarz is president of Roger Schwarz & Associates, a consulting firm specializing in helping organizations create fundamental change. This article is based on his book, *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches*, New and Revised Edition (Jossey-Bass, 2002); www.schwarzassociates.com, roger@schwarzassociates.com.

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