



Book Review: *The Secrets of Facilitation*, by Michael Wilkinson.

Sometimes you know things, but don't realize you know it.

Or, more accurately, sometimes you recognize and engage in behaviors, without being able to articulate why.

But then somebody comes along and articulates why and a light goes off.

The fact that you already "knew it" doesn't mean your time in "learning it" was wasted – to the contrary, you're now in a far better position to apply the knowledge rigorously and aggressively.

I had that experience several times when reading *The Secrets of Facilitation* by Charles Wilkinson.

Not that the book was entirely a confirmation of things I already knew.

The book was full of great advice for both the novice and experienced facilitator – anybody whose job it is to help corral a group towards group decision-making.

It's also a quick and well-organized read, which I recommend.

But for those who want a quick peak before (or in place of) reading it, here are a few lessons that I found particularly useful, ranging from the obvious to the subtle.

The Effective Decision

Wilkinson makes a really important point right from the start – distinguishing the most effective decision from the best decision. One decision can be "best" in that it will lead to the result with maximizes profit (for a for-profit) or maximizes the desired social impact (for a nonprofit), but if the people involved aren't committed to executing it, it probably isn't the most effective decision.

The most effective decision may not be one hundred percent optimal, but if it has the strong support of those who're essential for implementation.

The job of the facilitator – as laid out in much of the rest of the book – is how to structure a meeting process to achieve the most effective decision.

This point may seem obvious when put this way, but I've seen organizations violate it time and time again. I've witnessed leaders who refuse to let those who're essential for implementation play a meaningful role in the decision-making because "they don't understand," but then they get frustrated when implementation doesn't follow.

The Question Matters

A more subtle point Wilkinson makes has made me think harder about what questions I ask to launch discussions when I facilitate planning sessions or other meetings.

People who teach about storytelling will bludgeon you over the head until you get a central point: people think visually, so the more visual images you can embed in your storytelling, the more vivid the experience will be for the reader or listener.

Wilkinson applies that lesson to the questions facilitators ask. If you just ask the straightforward question in the typical language of the organization, people will struggle. If, on the other hand, you use words that force the listener to create an image in their head – they will answer the question more robustly.

One of the best parts of the book is that in this instance – and in most others – Wilkinson doesn't stop with the concept, but follows up with practical advice on how to implement it. In this instance, he suggests particular language you can use to generate imagery when asking questions ("Imagine," "Consider this," "Think about").

Disagreements

Managing disagreements is perhaps the biggest challenge facing both professional facilitators and nonprofit staff.

One of the lights that went off for me was the book's effort to distinguish between types of disagreements. In particular, the book identified three types of disagreements and suggested different ways of addressing them.

Participants can disagree about the underlying facts.

Participants can disagree based on their values or experiences.

Participants may disagree for reasons that have to do with past history or other things going on in their lives wholly unrelated to the situation at hand.

While disagreements of the last type really can't be resolved within the confines of the typical meeting, the book offers practical ideas of how you can most readily address the first two types of disagreements.

Weaknesses

Of course, I didn't agree with everything in the book. In particular, I thought the book glossed over the central challenge many meetings face – inadequate time. If you were to follow the book's approach completely, many meetings I've participated in simply wouldn't have been long enough – and there was no reasonable scenario to command more time from the participants.

Which processes should be jettisoned?

Nonetheless, the book should be well worth the time of anybody who leads a few meetings per year – whether as a board chair, as an Executive Director, as part of a coalition, or as an outside facilitator.

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