

The political facilitator

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This paper highlights a particularly challenging facilitation situation for people to ponder on. In presenting it at the AFN conference I sought input and insight from my fellow facilitators as to how to deal with it... and reflections upon how ideal group practices don't really work in this context!

The paper is structured around four topics:

1. Features of local government
2. The potential of more collaborative processes in local government
3. The story of my Council
4. 'It's just politics' - the overwhelming dynamic

1 Features of local government

Local government is the only sphere of government where there is no 'government' and 'opposition'. Everyone is meant to get on together, and work as a team.

However being on the same team and working towards the same goals, aims and vision are only theoretical. Despite developing a new vision for Council at the beginning of the year, and setting shared goals in our Council Plan, the Plan in my experience usually doesn't act as a touchstone for an individual Councillors actions or decisions. They are guided by their own judgement and politics.

That said, The Plan informs the agenda - what is brought to the Council table. In my experience despite our differences most of it is agreed to unanimously.

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If a Council in Victoria is considered to be dysfunctional then sacking the Council and starting again is the only legal avenue available. (There are currently plans to set up processes to sanction individual councillors, possibly culminating in the dismissal of an individual councillor - currently unless they clearly breach the local government act very little can be done regarding the behaviour of individual councillors.)

2 The potential of collaboration.

After two years of being a Councillor and being struck by how councillors had few skills and little understanding of how to work collaboratively, I pontificated as to how this could be different.

If only they had the skills, space and time things could be so different. This was my inspiration for my presentation at the AFN conference in 2004².

Some quotes from this paper:

A significant number of elected Councillors have few skills and little experience in working collaboratively. They operate under the dominant paradigm of winning and losing by voting, focusing where necessary on getting the numbers together, then making (relatively) quick decisions that are seen to be 'fair' because they have majority support. If you lose, you live with it. You can always try again later after doing some more work behind the scenes.

What made this of even greater interest to me was the realisation that this acceptance that 'the majority rules' or 'those with power rule' regardless of whether they are making the best decisions, and attendant lack of experience and inclination in making decisions collaboratively flows through to attitudes and practice in involving the community in decision making.

How is it possible for local government to promote and embrace community empowerment - "allowing the community to share in and influence decisions that affect their lives", when its very structures mitigate against it? If elected representatives are comfortable with the 'tyranny of the majority' and not properly engaging with the views of the minority even on Council, then although they may be comfortable

² *Challenging egos and the adversarial paradigm: Facilitating collaborative decision making processes in political organisations. Presentation at Australasian Facilitators Network Annual Conference October 2004 Janet Rice, Facilitation and Community Involvement.*

with community consultation: listening and receiving viewpoints; they are unlikely to be at all enamoured of inviting people to share in the decision making process, unless these people happen to agree with them. The decision making power stays firmly in the hands of those who are elected

If the decision makers know they have got the power to make the decision, and don't have sympathy for a particular point of view they can just ignore it. They don't need to engage with that point of view or negotiate or see if they can work out a solution that everyone can live with. The decision rests in their hands, and if they have the numbers on the decision making body then the decision is made the way they want it to be made. People can go away unhappy, see if there are other means of over-turning the decision, and ultimately vow to vote them out at the next election.

Pre-requisites for effective collaborative decision making

- △ Some over-arching shared values*
- △ Respect for the validity of others views*
- △ Willingness to share power. Willingness to not just listen to minority voices, but actively work to reach a decision so that their concerns and desires are included.*
- △ Mature participation from all participants. They have to be ready to listen to other points of view and realise that they don't have all the wisdom on the topic themselves.*
- △ willingness to shift position.*
- △ Acceptance that the benefits of finding a decision that everyone can live with outweigh the costs of having to give ground .*
- △ Skilled facilitation*

Barriers to collaborative decision making

- △ lack of commitment to equity and respect for all views regardless of status or background. A vote is seen as a fair way of making decisions that then allow you to disregard voices that aren't valued*
- △ big time egos*
- △ little willingness to share power - people see the benefits of winning as worth the potential cost of defeat - the long-term implications of division and inequity are discounted because of short-term gain.*

Rather than a willingness to share power there is a willingness to tough it out in an oppositional framework.

- △ *enjoyment of winning and having power over*
- △ *People have the opportunity to grandstand and feel victorious if they have won a vote and defeated an opposition.*
- △ *The media are more likely to be interested because of the conflict - important in keeping your profile high*
- △ *Huge history of working in this way. There is no trust or belief that others aren't going to lie, cheat and deceive you so you may as well join them!*

3 The story of my Council

I'm going to tell the story of my Council. . I was first elected four years ago, and was re-elected a year ago and was elected Mayor for a one year term shortly after my re-election. My Council has seven Councillors. I'm a Green, there are three members of the ALP, and three independents. I was elected Mayor with the support of the ALP Councillors. In return I supported one of them as Mayor at the Mayoral election just passed.

The ALP Councillors caucus with each other, prior to decision making meetings and as required at other times. They are bound to support caucus positions on the Mayoralty and the budget. They have a similar political outlook and largely respect each other. They support each other, but won't always vote the same way.

The three independents were elected on the same ticket and generally 'get on' together - that is they largely trust each other and as desired will caucus, discuss issues, listen to and consider each others points of view.

All of the Councillors are committed in their own way to working in what they see as the best interests of the community. However I find many of their behaviours work against our abilities to work together as a team, even in a limited sense.

Given my passion for working collaboratively and my belief that working in this way where possible is in the best interests of the community this has been the biggest frustration and disappointment of my mayoral year. As a facilitator however I know that I cannot change people's behaviours. I can attempt to facilitate behaviour change but it is up to the individual to change.

Some of the behaviours and traits of my fellow Councillors are listed below. By listing these, I am naming things as I see them. I don't want to appear overly critical and judgmental and label my Council as problematic. Nor do I want to

imply that my Council is any worse than many. In fact I think that based on my knowledge of other Councils that we are pretty average overall in the way we work together.

I acknowledge that I am significantly limited in my ability to facilitate this group. I am not a neutral facilitator. I can't love them all, I can't see the goodness shining through. I have formed judgments.

Regardless I continue to work with them and am willing, always willing, to give them another go at working collaboratively with me... ever the optimist!

The behaviours and personal traits

- Hard nosed, aspiring for bigger things politically,
- Intelligent and articulate, with a barbed tongue at times and a willingness to stick the knife into enemies.
- An operator. You do what you can to get the numbers together and do what you need to do to make sure you're one of the winners.
- A strong philosophy of social justice and equal opportunity coupled with an apparent belief that the end justifies the means. Therefore attacking ones political enemies as required is justified because it is what is seen to need to be done to deliver good progressive outcomes.
- Huge ego
- Likeable but overbearing
- Willing to recognize good work and praise across party lines, but also able to be highly critical and attacking.
- Has a view on everything and feels the need to share that view with everyone.
- Will lie where it is seen to be necessary, so can I really trust them?
- Enjoys being important and being in the local paper.
- Politics is all about deals - I'll give you this if you give me that.
- No long term strategic goals, other than the most general social justice ones.
- A populist, 'whatever it takes'. Willing to fight dirty for the cause.
- A superb practitioner of kissing someone sweetly whilst simultaneously stabbing them in the back.
- Always the victim.
- Very limited ability to think strategically, but very good at tactics.
- Very critical and prone to aggressive outbursts.
- Can be relied upon to see the 5% that is wrong and ignore the 95% that is done well.
- Extremely resistant to change. Once the mind is made up, anyone who doesn't agree is wrong.
- Sees herself as standing up for the community against an ineffective wasteful council that has got its priorities wrong.

- Needs to know all the details of an issue and has apparent difficulty discerning between information that is strategic and important and what is just detail.
- Because s/he is right and everyone else is wrong there is little insight into his/her own behaviour and reflecting that maybe that's why life is hardgoing.
- Doesn't like conflict. Wants everyone to get on together.
- More conservative but can accept that others have different points of view.
- Is capable of 'being less than transparent' when it suits, and sticking the knife in and creating hurt.

Our Council structures

We have four types of meetings:

- Ordinary council meetings, where formal meeting process is followed of motions being moved, seconded, debated and voted on
- Committee meetings: planning forums, and 'community access and strategic policy' meetings which are not decision making meetings. We hear from the community at these meetings and they are not set up to be forums for inter-councillor discussion and deliberation
- Briefings where the agenda mostly consists of officers presenting items to Councillors that will be considered at future council meetings. These meetings are chaired by the CEO. They are an opportunity for councillors to give feedback to officers whether we think they are on the right track about something - whether we think it needs more work, or a different slant. A recent example was how we reacted with regard to campaigning against the planned introduction of further pay parking in Footscray. To some extent there is an opportunity for deliberation. However if there is a considerable difference of opinion which is not easily resolved then the quite explicit process followed is to not attempt to reach a collaborative outcome, but to leave the debate to the chamber.
- Councillor only time - where Councillors inform each other about issues they would like to see raised, and/or which they are intending to propose as a motion at the next ordinary council meeting. They are also the only opportunity for collaborative deliberation about issues.

The year

Optimistically I thought the first few months were the usual settling in dynamics - people had been attacking each other during the election period and now were all expected to come together, kiss and make up and work effectively together. It's hard to do, but we did it last time.

We had our Councillor planning weekend, which was fairly strained and somewhat emotional, but given the circumstances wasn't too bad.

Working together continued not too problematically until I went away for six weeks mid year. When I got back it was a different story. Our June council meeting was all out war across the chamber.

The flashpoints and the bad behaviour

It's not so much that people have different views - it's that they use these differences as a springboard to score points and denigrate and belittle the opposition. Things are said in public debates and in private to deliberately annoy or to make a political point.

Sometimes the debate sticks to the issues and is merely then attacking what are often dearly held beliefs of others, at other times it spills over into personal attacks and putdowns.

And once one person starts, it's on - others feel totally justified in hitting back.

So we have had:

- Bad, bad, behaviour from screaming matches, to rudeness, to barbed insults, personal attacks and putdowns.
- In the context of and a history of:
 - shit sheets - someone putting out material during a previous election campaign accusing another Councillor of being a paedophile
 - someone else (therefore!) putting out material in Vietnamese saying the most vile things about another Councillor
 - someone signing a community activist up to a gay sex website and posting my name and phone number up as a prostitute around town
 - dead rats in another councillor's sister's letterbox

Political allegiances are so strong and historical and overwhelm current personal relationships. Every action anyone takes is seen through the prism of their politics.

Dealing with it

After the June meeting we took stock.

We agreed to a series of three externally facilitated sessions about how we would work together.

I changed my facilitation of meetings to a style which is less natural for me- I became a chair rather than a facilitator, imposing rules to keep order.

We developed a series of agreements and behaviours that every one accused the other side of breaking. (Of course then we got into arguments about 'yes you did, no I didn't'... we worked this one out by agreeing to just note when people were perceived to be behaving badly and come back at a later stage to work through the problem areas.)

At the beginning of Council meetings I gave out a reminder list of our agreements.

The agreements recognised that overall people didn't desire to work co-operatively, that there wasn't trust between us, and only limited interest in building it. All we could hope for was to build an agreement to work respectfully - to get everyone to agree to try to 'turn the other cheek' if they felt maligned rather than responding in kind with a 'but she started it...'

We had some successes. However, the underlying issue is that individually the main motivation for working together is merely that life would be nicer if they all stopped attacking each other. This has limited ability to over-ride what are seen to be the political benefits of attacking each other, and what have become ingrained ways of working for some Councillors. The benefits I see for the community of having a Council that works co-operatively together are not universally recognised.

'Councillor Only Time' (COT) usually fails miserably as a forum for collaborative discussion. One ray of hope however is that at least we have most councillors attending. The parking issue was one where COT was of benefit - there was overall agreement that it would be beneficial to us all if we could maintain a united front. In general however there is no motive to attempt such a task.

We had Council meetings in September and October which were almost civil, and celebrated with chocolate afterwards.

Maybe we could have made more progress but then the November state election intervened. One Councillor was standing for election as an

independent. She didn't take leave which was controversial in itself. Then there were charges laid against another Councillor concerning unauthorized and defamatory electoral materials during the council election the previous year... which were targeted at one of the others - I think the dynamic is pretty clear!

4 The overwhelming dynamic: 'It's just politics'

This is a culture where it's ok to hurt your political enemy. They are 'other', not worthy, dehumanised. You don't feel their pain - they had it coming - they deserve it. There is incredible judgment that my side is right, they are wrong and bad. And even if one may question whether what you are doing is really ok, it can be excused by the knowledge that 'the other side is doing it'.

And because 'it's just politics' you can be awfully nice and pretend that the animosity doesn't exist when you're not in attack mode. Chat together, make small talk, pretend everything is fine. Certainly never come near having a real heart to heart discussion of where your differences stem from, hearing from each other and understanding each other. In fact you can't do this. It's not safe. What you would reveal in a conversation like this could and would be used against you. They are your enemy and your job in politics is to destroy them.

And of the six of my fellow councillors I would say certainly four, maybe five of them are all capable of such things. And maybe I'm just being naïve about the sixth.

Is there any hope?

At the end of my paper two years ago I was optimistic.

I stated:

Can it be done?

First base would be for Councillors to decide that the benefits of finding a decision that everyone can live with and having a united Council if possible outweigh the costs of having to give ground and share power.

Between Councillors this means processes where all Councillors having the opportunity to be heard and to share in processes aimed at finding a collaboratively reached decision. This means spending the time to negotiate through differences, with the aim of reaching consensus if possible

Sigh.

I have recently finished my mayoral year. My biggest relief is that I don't have to feel responsibility any more to try to get this group of enemies to work together. I know it wasn't my responsibility, but that was the challenge I set myself at the beginning of the year, and despite my best efforts there is no more of a team that respects and values each other now than there was 12 months ago.

I continually come back to the term I learnt as part of alternative dispute resolution procedures - people are assessing their BATNA -their 'Best Alternative To a Negotiated Decision', and deciding that a better alternative to working together is to continue to be at political and personal war. The costs are high, but the benefits of winning politically and achieving personal vendettas are seen to be tantalizingly higher.

But there is hope. A core group of three Councillors do try to work across party lines. There could possibly be additions to this group.

My hopes for the final two years of our term together is that those of us who do want to work together work at it, and model that behaviour to the others. It has begun. We have an ALP Mayor this year and one of the Independents is Deputy Mayor. If we build trust, respect and a willingness to work collaboratively amongst this sub-group that will be a huge step forward.