

First Person Plural

Mapping the role of the child and family team facilitator

By John Franz

In most implementations of the wraparound approach, child and family team facilitators form the lynchpins of the community effort, yet the role of the facilitator may be the most ambiguous of any in the system of care. The goal of this article is to help facilitators and those who support and supervise them better articulate the nature of the job and deal with the pressure to move from facilitation to other forms of service and support.

What does it take to be a good facilitator?

When Bob Lewis was hired as a child and family team facilitator for the Kenyon County Collaborative, his prior experience was as a youth counselor in a day treatment program. His training was a bachelor's degree in psychology. He came to his new job with strong recommendations from his last supervisor who said, "Bob has great chemistry with kids. They like him and sense that he genuinely cares about them. He has boundless energy and sticks with a task until it gets done."

However, the supervisor didn't discuss Bob's knowledge of strength-based group process, his ability to form a loose assembly of people into a cohesive team, or his talent for helping that team generate and implement innovative solutions to intractable problems. So when Apollina Smith hired Bob and the other facilitators during the start up of the Collaborative, she had to go on her best sense of each person's raw talent. As she later explained to Carol Hartwig when Carol took over Apollina's position, "We had to look for people who could be good facilitators despite their prior training and experience."

So what is a facilitator supposed to do, anyway?

Roger M. Schwarz, a national group effectiveness guru, defines basic facilitation as: "a process in which a person who is acceptable to all members of the group, substantively neutral, and has no decision-making authority intervenes to help a group improve the way it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions, in order to increase the group's effectiveness."¹

A basic facilitator's expertise is focused on process rather than content. His or her job is to help a group solve an immediate problem. Schwarz identifies two other types of facilitation that have more involvement in the substance of the group's activity. A developmental facilitator helps a group improve its ability to work together effectively over time through the use of interim problem solving tasks, but still has authority only with regard to guiding group process. A facilitative leader has authority and expertise in both process and content. He or she helps the group improve its problem solving skills, but may act in a more directive manner while the group is acquiring those skills.

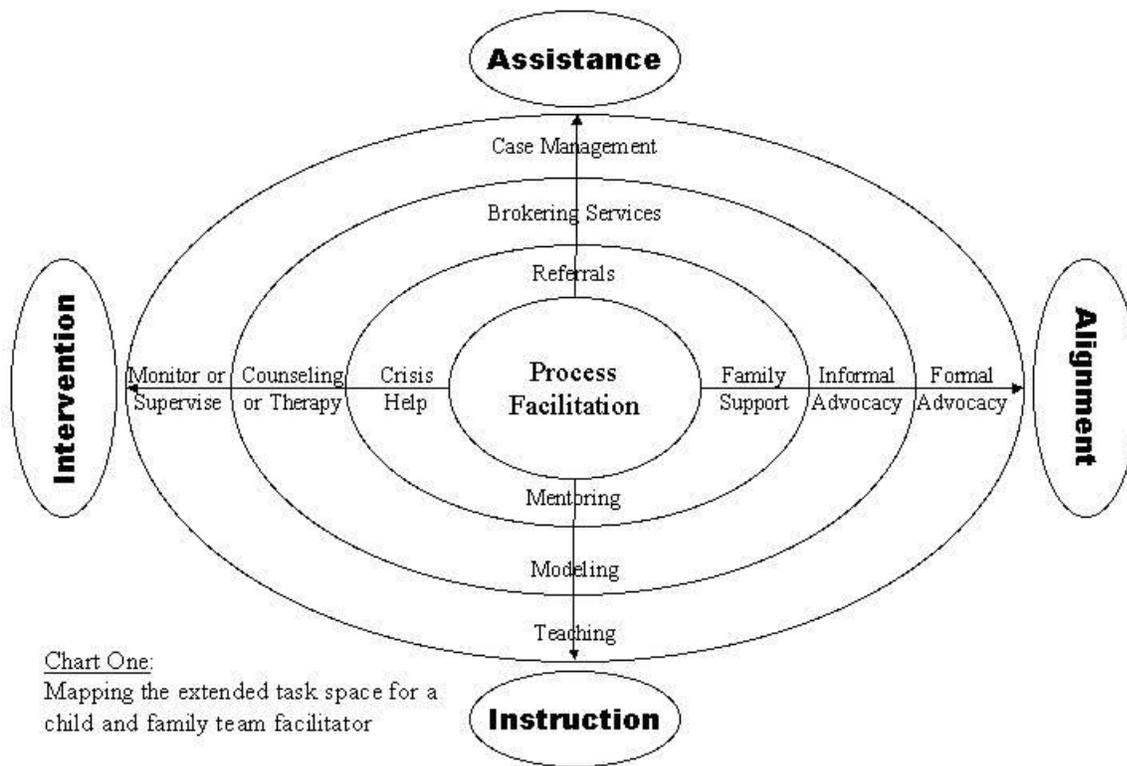
Depending on the local context, child and family team facilitators usually have roles somewhere between Schwarz's developmental facilitator and his facilitative leader. Some communities create separate units of people whose only job is to facilitate child and family teams. Primary service authority remains with traditional system staff, such as social workers or probation officers. In other communities, existing system staff carry out the facilitative role as an enhancement to their current responsibilities. In a third arrangement, communities may have separate child and family team facilitators, but invest that position with some, but usually not all of the duties of other system staff. For example child and family team facilitators may be expected to complete assessments and paperwork as if they were mental health case managers or prepare and file court reports in delinquency or child welfare court actions. They might also be expected to provide certain direct services, such as crisis intervention, family support, social skills training or counseling or therapy.

While it is important to maintain considerable flexibility in the child and family team facilitator role, those who are acting as facilitators need solid organizational and community support to stay centered on the primary task of helping the team acquire and use effective group process skills.

The following chart, developed by Carroll Schroeder, executive director of the California Alliance of Child and Family Services, is designed to help map variations in the cluster of duties facilitators may be asked to carry out beyond core process facilitation. Four axes are used to represent different types of expanded service responsibilities often attached to the facilitator role. Movement out along each axis indicates an increasing degree of intensity or formality.

Starting from process facilitation at the center of the chart, the *alignment* between the facilitator and the family can extend out into providing family support, informal advocacy, or formal advocacy (such as appearing on the family's behalf at a special education due process hearing). The *assistance* arranged for by the facilitator can move from making referrals on behalf of the team, to brokering access to resources, to ongoing case management.

The degree of *intervention* can progress from offering help for the child and family during a crisis, to providing counseling or therapy, or move into monitoring or supervising the conduct of the child or parents. *Instruction* might start with informal mentoring of the child or parents, continue on to demonstrating or modeling suggested behaviors, or involve active teaching of specific skills.



This chart can be used to clarify the roles facilitators are expected to play in a cross-system wraparound effort. Stakeholders can choose the limits to which facilitators should extend their relationships with children and families by picking points on each axis. For example, a community using independent facilitators who also provide service brokering might place the limits at one notch out on the intervention, instruction and alignment axes and two notches out on the assistance axes. In another community where child welfare workers are asked to double as facilitators in some instances, the points might be placed further out on the assistance and intervention scales, but further in on the alignment and instruction measures.

In each case, connecting up the four points would define the boundaries or task space within which that community's facilitators would be expected to operate. The tools, training, supervision and support provided to facilitators and teams would then reflect those choices. Different communities will set different limits. What is most important is to discuss the issues openly and reach a shared understanding and consensus. The exercise can also be used to illuminate hidden conflicts that the system may be imposing on facilitators.

Similarly, the chart can be used to help individual facilitators. By mapping out the responsibilities they are carrying within individual teams, and comparing the maps across the various teams they are supporting, they can illustrate patterns that may be developing. The goal is to have a balanced set of responsibilities, focused on the core task of facilitating group effectiveness. When the pattern seems to be out of alignment, or when conflicts are developing across opposing axes (for example, attempting to both monitor client behavior and act as an

advocate), the facilitator and the team should work to transfer some duties to more appropriate team members.

How many hats are you wearing today?

Bob Lewis was pretty green when he started out with the collaborative. But he's learned a lot by surviving for 6 years while the project has grown and changed, weathered various political and economic attacks, and transitioned from Apollina's charismatic leadership to Carol's disciplined management style. In fact, staff from new projects in other counties sometimes come to Kenyon to shadow Bob and his colleagues and learn from their experiences.

Cindy Bremer, a child protection worker from a small county in the northern part of the state, has been hanging out with Bob for two days. They are debriefing over cheeseburgers and beer at Georgie's Hops and Chops, a microbrew emporium on Kenyon's town square.

Cindy, who has been a social worker for 12 years, is confused by what she's seen. "So," she asks Bob, "are you their social worker, their therapist, or what?"

Bob adds a liberal helping of A-1 sauce to the mushrooms and onions on his burger, smiles and gives Cindy an Apollina-type answer, "Mostly I'm the 'or what'."

Cindy shakes her head. "Let me put it a different way. What's your job, and how do you know whether or not you're doing it well?"

Bob remembers how frustrating it was to deal with Apollina when she was being enigmatic and decides to shift gears.

"My job is to partner with families and their circles of formal and informal support and help them solve problems together. But where I work and whom I work for structures the way I do that job. Although I'm housed at child welfare, I am seen as working for the Collaborative, which is a not quite separate but sort of virtual entity from child welfare, mental health, probation or education. In theory, I'm a neutral third party trying to help all of the service systems work together when kids and families need integrated assistance. In reality I'm a member of every system's organization. Feedback on how I'm doing my job comes from both the families and the other folks on the team."

"So you can get it from all sides. Lucky you. But I think my situation is supposed to be different. All of our cases will be court ordered, and we won't have a separate set of facilitators. I'll be the social worker and I will also run the child and family team. Do you think that could work or will the social worker me start arguing with the facilitator me?"

Bob finishes his cheeseburger, dips a few more of Georgie's amazing, skin on, damn-the-cholesterol, hand-cut fries in the A-1 sauce and ponders for a moment how weird it feels to have been making it up as you go along for 6 years and suddenly to have people asking you questions as if you were some sort of expert.

“It’s definitely two different hats. If there’s a court case, and the child’s placed outside the home, as a social worker you’re supposed to set the conditions for return, monitor visits and check on compliance. As a facilitator you help the family and its circle of support identify strengths and needs, set goals and devise creative ways of using strengths to meet needs. A couple of years ago I would have said you can’t do both. But I’ve been on enough teams now to realize that I’m usually wearing several hats and the point is to be clear about which hat is on top. In your situation, you might offer the team the opportunity to share the task of setting conditions and doing monitoring. You have to let them know what is needed to meet the court’s requirements, but by working together you might come up with ideas you never would have thought of by yourself.”

Cindy’s expression is alternating between confusion, concern and pain.

“I don’t know about this team stuff. We aren’t given much time to develop our court reports. Even if we had more time, it still makes me uncomfortable. After all, I’m the one who gets sued if something goes wrong. Plus it’s a bunch more work on top of what’s already on my plate. And if the team can’t come up with something decent, I’ll still have to do it myself.”

“You’re right, Cindy. There is nothing more frustrating than having a team just for the sake of having a team.”

“Then why bother?”

“Because sometimes it’s all you’ve got left.”

Moving from me and them to we

In wraparound, facilitating effective group process doesn’t just mean helping a group of people get along better with one another, nor is it simply insuring that the plans of the various service providers are well coordinated. Although those are both good things, the ultimate purpose of a child and family team is to generate successful solutions that did not exist prior to the team’s coming together.

Wraparound begins with the humble admission that no one person has all the answers. When there is an existing support, service or treatment that will work, the team should use it. But when faced with a situation that exceeds current community capabilities, the team should be prepared to think creatively, adapt what is available to better fit the family’s situation and construct new options. We shift from the deductive mode of the traditional assessment-treatment model to an inductive approach to help us generate new solutions.

Using a child and family team as the foundation for creative problem solving offers several advantages. First, the team brings together people with a variety of points of view that when blended provide everyone with new perspectives on the child and family’s situation. Second, the team puts more talent on the table. Each member brings his or her own unique gifts, and when you’re making it up as you go along, you never know which gift will be the one that makes the difference. Third, if the members of the team generate a new solution together, they will own it

together – which will give the solution a much better chance of working. Instead of an intervention imposed on a child and family - and perhaps on their social worker or probation officer as well - it is a strategy they have chosen together. Effective group process transforms a diverse aggregation of individuals into a collaborative unit that operates in the first person plural.

In other words, we work better together.

It's not as hard as it looks

Bob sits up in his chair and moves his half-finished beer to one side.

“It is scary to feel responsible for doing the impossible. When I start with a new family, I’m always worried that this time we won’t be able to come up with an answer. I also am afraid that the team will expect me to do all the work.”

Cindy takes off her glasses, as if somehow that helps her see Bob better.

“And do those things ever happen?”

Bob pauses, wishing he had some glasses to take off. He knows he has to give her the honest answer, but is worried how she will take it.

“Sure they do. But not as often as you might think.”

“Still, it must suck.”

“It sucks out loud. But nothing gives us a hundred percent success. I think things get better more often and stay better longer using this approach. You learn to trust the process. Most teams don’t start out as teams. During the stabilization phase I’m more of a case manager and service broker than a facilitator, but I try to be honest about the role and I try to foreshadow the changes. Once everyone has had a week or two to catch their breath and the membership of the team has begun to stabilize, people start to get a better feel for the process steps and we pick up the pace. I facilitate more and case-manage less. Bounce things back when people shove the weight in my direction. Challenge folks to get more creative with their ideas. You have to help people build up their team muscles.”

“This sounds like a lot of work.”

“At the beginning, but once people catch on, they like it. As we move out of the stabilization phase and get rolling on implementation, the trust and confidence levels begin to rise. They start doing more of the facilitation themselves. That’s how I know when they’re ready to move into the transition phase. My satisfaction comes from working myself out of a job.”

“I don’t know. I might be better off just staying a social worker.”

“Facilitating teams isn’t for everyone. But you were pretty engaged at the team meetings you came to. And you had some great ideas. I think you’ve got real potential.”

The checks come and they head up to the counter to pay. While Cindy is waiting for her change, she says to Bob, “I appreciate the compliment. I don’t know whether it’s right for me, but I can tell that this is something you really enjoy. You seemed so natural with the families and teams.”

“You should have seen me the first couple of years. I was so nervous I threw up before going to some of the more contentious meetings. But I love the work. At the moment I can’t picture myself doing anything else. Which is frightening, because there’s no career ladder for child and family team facilitators. Until our agencies start seeing us as an integral part of the service system rather than an external enhancement, we’ll stay oddballs in the field.”

As they walk out to their cars, Cindy stops to shake Bob’s hand.

“Thanks for the tour, Bob, but I have to say that you have a strange way of selling wraparound. From what you’ve told me, if I take this on I can look forward to frequent vomiting, the ruination of my career, and being ostracized by my peers. What an opportunity!”

“Hey, you forgot the low pay.”

“Oh, that makes it all worthwhile. Does it have anything else going for it?”

“Well, you stop having to do it all by yourself. At least some of the time.”

Questions for discussion

How does Bob’s story apply in your community’s implementation of wraparound? Who are the child and family team facilitators in your community? Where do they sit within your basic system? Are there facilitators who aren’t in any system at all? What hats do your child and family team facilitators who are in a system wear? How have you seen the various facilitator roles managed and handled well within a team setting? Where have you seen them not handled well? What could be done in your system to help child and family teams become a more integrated component of the overall system of care? Looking at the chart of facilitator roles, what else might go in the center as the most basic relationship to a family and its circle of care?

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ⁱ Schwarz, Roger M. (1994) *The Skilled Facilitator: Practical Wisdom for Developing Effective Groups*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.