

Notes on *Verbal Agility: Facilitation Tips & Techniques*

Presented by Michele Sliger and Erika Lenz

michele@sligerconsulting.com

Erika.Lenz@asynchrony.com

Agile2018 Conference – San Diego CA USA – August 6, 2018

Self-Organization

“A self-organizing system is one where the system structure appears without explicit intervention from outside the system.” – Sugata Mitra

“...where a structure or pattern appears in a system without a central authority or external element imposing it through planning.” - Wikipedia

“A group possesses a self-organizing capability when it exhibits three conditions: autonomy, self-transcendence, and cross-fertilization.” – Takeuchi & Nonaka

“Self-organizing systems also always show emergence*, which is that the system starts to do things that it was never designed for. Which is why you react the way you do [with surprise at seeing how fast the children learned in Mitra’s video, see “Homework” section], *because it looks impossible.*” – Sugata Mitra

*Emergence: the appearance of a property not previously observed as a functional characteristic of the system.

In Agile, teams self-organize around a goal. You can see this manifest in planning meetings and retrospective meetings. You can also observe this in events run as Open Spaces. For more info on Open Space Technology, see:

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Space_Technology
- <http://openspaceworld.org/wp2/>

“For teams to self-organize they need a goal, they need to know the boundary conditions, they need proper tools, and they need to be in a safe environment. And all this assumes they are an actual team that has to work together, i.e. the goal is not one that an individual working by themselves could achieve.” – Michele Sliger

There are lots of articles on self-organization, or “self-directed work teams” available, many of them academic in nature. You can google and find many yourself.

Communication

Reflective Listening: understanding what a person is trying to say, then offering that understanding back to the speaker. Reflective listening involves one's full attention, empathy, and mirroring techniques. Download this summary of reflective listening:

<https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/uploadedFiles/parcc/cmc/Reflective%20Listening%20NK.pdf>

Body Language: nonverbal communication indicated by body position, facial expressions, eye movement, gestures, posture, haptics and personal space. Being aware of what's being said with the body is just as important as listening to the words. Watch for incongruence between nonverbal and verbal communication. A good read on the topic is *The Nonverbal Advantage: Secrets and Science of Body Language at Work* by Carol Kinsey Goman.

The Tact Filter:

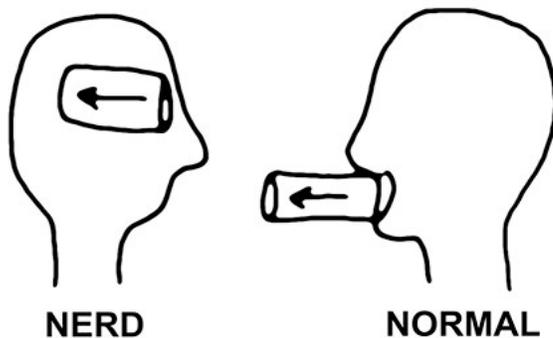


Image by Adam Lisagor, <http://lonelysandwich.com/>
"Tact Filter" courtesy of Jeff Biglar, <http://www.mit.edu/~jcb/tact.html>

Jeff Biglar is an MIT graduate, former pharma research scientist, and now a high school chemistry teacher. He says:

All people have a "tact filter", which applies tact in one direction to everything that passes through it. Most "normal people" have the tact filter positioned to apply tact in the outgoing direction. Thus whatever normal people say gets the appropriate amount of tact applied to it before they say it. This is because when they were growing up, their parents continually drilled into their heads statements like, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all!"

"Nerds," on the other hand, have their tact filter positioned to apply tact in the incoming direction. Thus, whatever anyone says to them gets the appropriate amount of tact added when they hear it. This is because when

nerds were growing up, they continually got picked on, and their parents continually drilled into their heads statements like, "They're just saying those mean things because they're jealous. They don't really mean it."

When normal people talk to each other, both people usually apply the appropriate amount of tact to everything they say, and no one's feelings get hurt. When nerds talk to each other, both people usually apply the appropriate amount of tact to everything they hear, and no one's feelings get hurt. However, when normal people talk to nerds, the nerds often get frustrated because the normal people seem to be dodging the real issues and not saying what they really mean. Worse yet, when nerds talk to normal people, the normal people's feelings often get hurt because the nerds don't apply tact, assuming the normal person will take their blunt statements and apply whatever tact is necessary.

So, nerds need to understand that normal people have to apply tact to everything they say; they become really uncomfortable if they can't do this. Normal people need to understand that despite the fact that nerds are usually tactless, things they say are almost never meant personally and shouldn't be taken that way. Both types of people need to be extra patient when dealing with someone whose tact filter is backwards relative to their own.

Facilitation

"A **facilitator** is someone who helps a group of people understand their common objectives and assists them to plan to achieve them without taking a particular position in the discussion. Some facilitator tools will try to assist the group in achieving a consensus on any disagreements that preexist or emerge in the meeting so that it has a strong basis for future action. The role has been likened to that of a midwife who assists in the process of birth but is not the producer of the end result."

– Wikipedia

Facilitators often use Organizing Tools such as:

- Agenda
- Purpose...Expected Outcomes
- Ground Rules
- Parking Lot

Be sure to empty the parking lot at the end of every meeting. Leaving items in the parking lot without addressing them says to the team that you just wanted them to shut up and have no plans to consider their concerns.

- Action Items
- Others:
 - Decisions Made

- Communication Plan
- Assumptions, Constraints
- Calendar
- Etc.

The following are questions that facilitators often use to help get meetings back on track. They were pulled from various sources (listed at the end) and personal experience.

Preventing pontificators from hijacking the meeting:

- Could you summarize that into three or four bullet points for me?
- Who can summarize what Pat just shared?
- Would someone like to share a different viewpoint?
- Does anyone else see things differently?
- Jesse, you look thoughtful. Would you like to share what's on your mind?
(When asking people by name for input, be careful. Make sure they know that "I pass" is a right. This is not to be used to put someone on the spot.)
- Let's do a quick process check. Given our agenda and goals for today, do we need to timebox this discussion?

Staying on topic and out of the weeds:

- Is this discussion helping us to achieve our purpose?
- How does that relate to this topic?
- Can we solve this problem right now?
- Is this the right group to make this decision?
- How much more time do we need to spend discussing this topic?
- Does this need to go in the parking lot?

Miscellaneous:

Use these for brainstorming, for clarifying issues, to get unstuck and moving forward again.

- What else? (encourages dialogue)
- Anything else? (ends dialogue)
- What don't we know?
- Why is that important?
- What does your experience tell you?
- What does that word mean to you?
- What just happened here?
(For when something surprising happens, like someone storming out, name-calling, etc.)
- Hold on a second. Let's pretend I'm in charge for a minute. (smile!)

Don't forget to smile! And be patient as you wait for someone to answer.

And don't forget to be gracious and encouraging:

- Thank you for that suggestion
- This is hard work and I really appreciate how you're staying focused
- You've clearly put a lot of thought into this
- Thanks for remembering our ground rules
- You guys are making great progress—just a few more items and we'll be finished
- Thank you

Sources:

Sparkling Productive Dialogue by Maria C. Birkhead

Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making by Sam Kaner

Collaboration Explained by Jean Tabaka

Esther Derby: <http://www.estherderby.com/>

Homework!

For the remainder of the conference, avoid using the word “but” in conversation. Whenever you find yourself getting ready to say “but...” say “Yes, AND...” instead. Observe how it affects the tone of the conversation.

Watch/read the following to learn more about the agility of self-organizing teams and how facilitation eases the journey:

TED talk on the Marshmallow exercise:

https://www.ted.com/talks/tom_wujec_build_a_tower

If you spend any time in the Agile community you'll eventually play or hear about the marshmallow exercise. See how iteration and collaboration can affect product delivery. Video, 7 minutes. See also <http://www.marshmallowchallenge.com/>

Sugata Mitra's TED talk on Child-Driven Education:

https://www.ted.com/talks/sugata_mitra_the_child_driven_education

This talk is inspiring in that it shows the potential power of self-organization. Children, given the right tools and a clear directive, swarm on the problem and do remarkably well. Video, 17 minutes.

<https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/RoleofAFacilitator.htm>

Good overview of facilitation. Includes links to tools such as icebreakers and brainstorming. Article, could be a lengthy read if you click on all the links. Allocate 30 minutes.

Just for the control freaks (you know who you are):

https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability

Being a good facilitator means you have to let go of control and give it over to the team, and instead serve as a coach and guide. This TED talk is by a researcher, so no fluff here, just good qualitative data. Video, 20 minutes.

Additional Reading

If you're feeling like adding some books to your new agile library on facilitation and communication, I highly recommend the following:

- *Agile Retrospectives* by Esther Derby and Diana Larson
- *Behind Closed Doors: Secrets of Great Management*_by Johanna Rothman and Esther Derby
- *Collaboration Explained* by Jean Tabaka
- *Crucial Conversations*_by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler
- *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making* by Sam Kaner
- *Innovation Games* by Luke Hohmann
- *The Nonverbal Advantage: Secrets and Science of Body Language at Work* by Carol Kinsey Goman
- *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* by Harrison Owen
- *Project Retrospectives* by Norm Kerth
- *Sparking Productive Dialogue*_by Maria C. Birkhead