

OVERCOMING RESISTANCE TO VE BY INTEGRATING COMMITMENT AND DIALOGUE

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ABSTRACT:

Resistance in VE sessions is a major barrier to the success of the VE Process. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the VE Process will take hold if the VE specialist dares to exhibit and use his or her passion and commitment to the VE Process and engaging the team more deeply. By revealing and sharing commitment to VE and by using creative dialogue, the VE specialist can overcome most of the resistance to the VE Process and lead the team to dramatically increased participation and creativity.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most frustrating aspects of any facilitator-based process is the hidden aspect of resistance by participants. Consciously or unconsciously, even when success and savings are in the offing, participants may limit their participation, argue unnecessarily with the facilitator, keep emotional and intellectual distance from the VE process, and even sabotage the success of their own projects. Some participants and facilitators blame resistance on lack of "chemistry" on the part of the facilitator or lack of open-mindedness on the part of the participants. Top-level support of the VE process may have only superficial impact on resistance. Bottom line: resistance at the level of facilitators and participants can be handled at best by the facilitator.

Facilitators learn a lot about handling resistance. However, much of the literature on dealing with resistance focuses on managing the behavior of the "difficult people" among the participants.

Though this seems like a logical approach, many facilitators who learn these techniques struggle with implementing them. The techniques require large amounts of emotional and verbal self-control and often stilted communications. They also require instant, perceptive, and often psychological evaluations by the facilitator of complex behavior exhibited by the participants. Also, "difficult" people might be adding a lot of value to the discussion, so a confident facilitator shouldn't try to "shut them down." Better: facilitators should focus on what they have the most control and comprehension of: their own attitudes and behavior during the VE process.

The purpose of this paper is to delineate how the internal state and verbal and nonverbal communications of facilitators can dramatically enhance how the VE process is perceived and received, leading to less resistance and greater satisfaction for both the VE consultant and the participants. It is not an easy process to become introspective and self-critical, especially when one's job is to stand for hours in front of

potentially critical and resistant groups. However, using a step by step approach, consultants can maximize their personal strengths and create an environment that is conducive to participation, creativity, and openness.

SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

Examining the VE process for the consultants' sphere of influence is easy. VE stakeholders are clear: corporate executives and other stakeholders, team members, and the facilitator. In terms of influencing these participants, facilitators have varying amounts of control. Despite wishes to the contrary, the facilitators' greatest span of control is for their own behavior: how they wish to come across, the tone they want to set for the VE process, how well they listen, and what they communicate verbally or nonverbally. For example, a facilitator who senses resistance in the room may go to an extreme of becoming either forceful in insisting that the team follow the plan, withdrawn emotionally from the group, or indecisive, insecure, or self-doubting when the team is uncooperative. Extremes are not conducive to lessening resistance. Wishful thinking for another team and the desire to leave the entire situation may seem like more natural solutions at these times.

Especially under stress, we can become an exaggeration of our worst traits: over-controlling, emotional, self-doubting, tense, self-absorbed, or punitive. Knowing our natural tendencies can limit these reactions to stress and resistance but not eliminate them. Consciously taking responsibility for managing our emotional and psychological sensitivities is a way to turn our influence and self-interest in a positive direction.

KEY: Facilitators need to focus on having a conscious impact on the energy and positivism in the room rather than just focusing on a combination of leading the VE process and "surviving" a difficult group. This approach gives the facilitator genuine optimism, energy, and enthusiasm for leading the VE process.

WHY FOCUS ON THE FACILITATORS?

Emotional Self-Control

Besides the facilitators having the greatest influence and control over themselves,

facilitators can experience a tough facilitation as an opportunity for emotional growth. For example, facilitators who feel spikes of tension and paralysis of thinking and leading skills under duress can learn and anticipate what triggers these reactions and how to use thinking ability to calm themselves, thus practicing avoiding what Dr. Daniel Goleman, a neuroscientist, calls "emotional hijacking."¹ Emotional hijacking occurs when we are frightened or very emotional. Our thinking skills decline because our brains activate only those parts dedicated to tension and to the physical reactions of tension such as rigidity, panic, and sweating; simultaneously, we fail to use the better paths of the cortical or thinking parts of our brains while "emotionally hijacked." Dr. Goleman's theory is that we can learn to avoid emotional hijacking, but first we have to take full responsibility for handling these emotional moments in a non-hijacked way. Goleman's theories also hold that this lack of intellectual skill when we are emotional happens more in Western cultures than for Eastern. In Eastern cultures, how to think when emotional is apparently taught and practiced.

Apparently the first step in influencing ourselves is to become conscious of our natural and unskillful tendencies to let ambiguity and self-doubt stop us from consciously thinking of better ways to influence.

Most Motivated to Change

Even though the obvious stakeholders, corporate management and the team, would seem to be logical drivers for change, in fact the facilitator is probably the most driven. Why? Because the facilitator's future as a consultant with any firm is at stake. This is honestly a very strong motivator. For example, if the team fails, the team can blame the consultant or the VE process. The VE facilitator may attempt to blame the team or lack of support by senior management, but this approach could lead to loss of business with that company.

Facilitators Lead Attitude

Many facilitators would be surprised to think of themselves as leaders of attitude rather than just process leaders. Although you cannot force others to think the same way as you do, you can model how you want them to think, and you can be so clear and persuasive in being that model that the team simply emulates you. This behavior is called "symmetry," and it refers to the well-

known fact that groups emulate the leader when the leader is clear and charismatic.² Similarly, if the attitude of the leader or facilitator toward VE is apparently positive and open-minded (without being overbearing), then the group will follow suit. When the facilitator evidences doubt in the process, so will the group, by symmetry effect.

Sometimes, leading the attitude of the team may involve some acting, especially when the facilitator needs to reach out to people and be strong even when he or she is naturally shy and inhibited. More on this later.

Facilitators and VE Credibility

The VE process is credible because it has very good surface logic. Then again, so do other VIPs. If facilitators present VE very aggressively or too passively, then the credibility of VE is at stake. Like many service-type products, the "product" in the absence of experience with it by the participants is both hard to imagine and even suspect.³ It might be too hard to do or not produce the results described by the consultant. Result: resistance. To enhance credibility, the VE consultant has to demonstrate reasonable belief and enthusiasm for VE both verbally and nonverbally. This does not mean "selling" VE before or during the VE process. What it means is becoming conscious of how VE facilitators actually feel or think about the VE process and honestly addressing each personal belief before seeing the clients or teams. The goal is to maximize personal belief in VE and to consciously know how you convey your beliefs about VE.

Facilitators and Future VE Work

Often clients and teams will request VE again because VE produced significant savings and improvements. However, they will request a certain consultant because they believed in and liked him or her. Consequently, future VE projects will come just as much from the credibility and popularity of the consultant as from the savings.⁴ The savings part is easy to understand. The popularity of the consultant is a function of the consultant's efficacy, attitude, and behavior. The consultant who facilitates well, demonstrates a constructive and supportive attitude, and has consistently comfortable styles of interaction will be asked back. Plain and simple.

Facilitators and Communication

Facilitators believe that they are communicating well when the participants show signs of good comprehension and use of the appropriate steps in the VE process. They're wrong. Good communication for facilitators includes being able to hear implied meanings, anticipating the team's concerns, and managing the room for maximal comfort and focus. Facilitators need to probe not just VE comprehension but VE and participant acceptance and comfort.

TWO KEY INFLUENCE FUNCTIONS FOR FACILITATORS

The key functions needed for effective influence are:

1. Commit and believe in your process
2. Engage in deeper dialogue

Function 1: Commit and Believe in Your Process

VE has so many components and techniques. Some, such as FAST diagrams, are challenging to even seasoned VE consultants. When VE consultants are afraid of a part of the process or doubt its true value, then they risk inability to demonstrate commitment and belief in VE in front of the group. Whether distracted by anxiety over the prospect of having to do something not very well in front of the team or dreading omitting part of the VE process, the VE consultant will probably show this lack of commitment or certainty about VE unconsciously to the team or other stakeholders. Choices: the VE consultant with doubts can express them, inhibit them, mask them, or ventilate about them to VE peers. Better: the VE consultant with doubts needs to confront those doubts and make a conscious decision to mentally work on the doubts. This is not to say that the only way a VE consultant should approach VE is to embrace every aspect of the VE process with total acceptance. It means that the VE consultant should "take VE apart" and explain VE to him- or herself in a way that leads to a sense of compatibility and satisfaction with VE instead of complaining or harboring negative feelings or thoughts about even a small part of the process. For integrity's sake, the consultant should not stand in front of a group, take a week of their time, and have them engage in a process that the consultant does not believe in. Complaining to peers or even the team or

secretly omitting a portion of VE are not satisfying options for the doubting consultant. The consultant needs to consciously examine his or her problems with VE and answer his or her own objections honestly and clearly before working with a group. I am not saying that VE consultants have to embrace every aspect of the VE process but that they need to consider their level of belief and commitment to everything that they ask the team to do. In other words, use what you believe in. If you are not sure you believe in a part of a process, then either change it to something you do believe in or use that part of the process and suspend your disbelief for the sake of the team.

Another commitment problem related to working with VE is how alone the consultant actually is in a facilitator's role. While a major stakeholder among several, the consultant in most instances is an "outsider" to the company or the team. The result of aloneness is increased potential for self-doubt. When the team struggles with VE, when senior managers don't show up for presentations, and when team members are resistant or absent, the consultant is the one who experiences the most self-doubt. VE consultants should have several ways to reinforce their belief in themselves and the VE process. One way is to keep track of previous successes. Another way is to keep a written record of good things said about the facilitators. To reinforce the latter approach is a true story quoted in the book series *Chicken Soup for the Soul* written by leadership skill consultant Jack Canfield. In one story, an elementary school teacher told her students to write down good things about each person in her class. The teacher collected and gave each student a whole page of his or her personal compliments. In the story, fifteen years after that assignment, one of her students, who was then a soldier in Vietnam, was killed in action. When his parents received his effects, they found in his wallet a much-folded and worn-out piece of paper. That paper was the list of compliments written by his elementary school classmates many years before.⁵ It is a very moving story. Perhaps all consultants who are in such vulnerable and lonely positions need a page of praise from previous clients, friends, and family or other ways to manage even momentary self-doubt or self-preoccupation.

Besides taking responsibility for the role as a committed leader in VE, the VE consultant

should consciously monitor his or her wording, tone of voice, facial expression, and body language for signs of commitment and belief in VE. Committed verbal and nonverbal language is focused on the listeners, relaxed, open, positive, and humble.

If the consultant has either genuinely negative, unresolved feelings about VE or, on the other hand, excessively passionate or forceful feelings about VE, he or she may need to compartmentalize his or her feelings for the sake of the VE process and the team. In this situation, the consultant should decide to address his or her feelings in privacy. The goal is to focus on the team rather than on the consultant during the process. The consultant should deliberately put the team in the spotlight as a solution to strong consultant feelings. To focus on the team, the consultant can ask team members what their concerns are, what their needs are, and how they can help each other. This can be done in private or with the group.

Hopefully most VE consultants are very positive about the VE process and its potential to help the team and the clients. For this reason, the consultant should be capable of expressing genuine passion and commitment to the VE process. Credible expression of commitment is achieved verbally and nonverbally. Verbally, the consultant can use wording that is personal such as "I'm committed to helping you get the results you want through this process" or complimentary, such as, "I'm enthusiastic about your skills." Public statements such as these reinforce not just the listeners' belief in the consultant's commitment but also reinforces the consultant's beliefs in the people and the process.

Another way to increase personal commitment is to consciously be persuasive throughout the entire facilitation. Whereas most consultants are persuasive in the sales phase, during the introduction of the team process, or for the presentations to senior executives, they would do better to be consciously persuasive throughout the facilitation. First, they need to identify what is persuasive to a particular group. There are numerous persuaders. They can be divided into persuaders that influence content of speaking or writing (Figure 1) and those that are based upon the facilitator's style (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Content Types of Persuaders

The first table identifies the top four persuaders for executives⁶:

1. Clear Information	2. Discuss Implications	3. Help with Decisions	4. Respect Constraints
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ provides facts and figures logically ▪ gives meaningful statistics ▪ makes relevant projections ▪ assigns value or ranking to information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ thinks of implications of the proposed change for the unit, department, division, or corporation ▪ talks about implications of the implications across engineering, marketing, finance, manufacturing, QA, IT, customers, suppliers, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Knows and discusses decisions to be made ▪ outlines next steps ▪ shows signs of commitment and energy ▪ acts decisively ▪ makes recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ considers regulations & requirements ▪ sensitive to limitations ▪ shows how to do more with less ▪ something missing? ▪ budget limitations ▪ potential negative impact ▪ Are the numbers right? ▪ “holistic worry”

Other persuaders:

5. Prevent Problems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ analyzes potential problems ▪ provides solutions ▪ provides security by preventing problems ▪ risk averse ▪ takes responsibility/ownership 	6. Unspoken Needs Met <p>needs for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ acknowledgment ▪ approval ▪ trust ▪ acceptance ▪ attention ▪ affirmation of their ideas 	7. Achieve Goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ connects to their goals ▪ increases promotability ▪ politics: who to influence
8. Give Options <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ presents alternatives/choices or possibilities 	9. Increase Leverage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can generalize learnings ▪ Can influence other departments ▪ Cross-functionality 	10. It's really THEIR idea <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ involves audience in process of choosing methods or conclusions ▪ find something to attribute to them in your presentation
11. Have Precedence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ describes previous cases ▪ offers benchmarking info ▪ presents new or innovative ideas (no precedence) 	12. Spell Out Reasonable Costs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Detailed budget and results ▪ Costs are less than expected ▪ Get more for less ▪ Conservative projections 	13. State Actionables and Impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to-do items ▪ deliverables ▪ metrics/measurements ▪ time frames ▪ impact on people and profits

Figure 2. Style Types of Persuaders to Convey Warmth and Authority

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Speak in a louder voice with longer vowels and more intonation or up and down movement in your voice. 2. Use emotion-based language: Say, "I'm excited about..., I was pleasantly surprised that..., I found it interesting that..." 3. Attach a professional value judgment to your facts: Say, "It's good that..., It's critical that we..., This means that..., In our experience, this works well..." 4. You demonstrate energy, commitment, and responsibility: Say "I'm committed to..., I will take responsibility for..., I'm looking forward to..." and show your positive emotions in your face and body.
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Make VE Accessible

To feel better about VE, VE consultants may exaggerate either the simplicity or the complexity of the process, depending upon their personal needs. If consultants exaggerate the simplicity of the process, they may think that they are making the process more acceptable and irresistible. However, as soon as the team has difficulty with VE, credibility and commitment drop. If they exaggerate the complexity, they add to their self-importance and drive home the point that the client will need a smart consultant to help them. The credibility problem here could be that the client resists starting something complex or thinks that the consultant is too self-serving.⁷

Either way, VE credibility and commitment are compromised. Make VE user-friendly by being fair about its complexity and about the clients' need for your services. Another valuable consequence of this approach is that the consultant can feel genuinely confident of what he or she is saying and genuinely committed to promises made about VE — neither over-promising nor under-promising.

Acknowledge Team Commitment and Constraints

Another way to enhance commitment to VE is to increase awareness and communication about results as quickly as possible in the VE process. Results are reinforcing. Commitment, like many behaviors, continues when it is reinforced. For example, when the consultant and the team commit to working with the process, they need continual reinforcement for their commitment. This can be accomplished by stepping back during the VE process and acknowledging the committed action, positive attitudes, and hard work by the facilitator and the team.

Commitment is compromised when either the facilitator or the team fails to consider and acknowledge the constraints on both of them. In an effort to appear strong and professional, the facilitator may try to ignore or downplay the importance of mutual time pressures, expectations, energy limitations, and other personal and professional pressures. There may be fear that discussing these unspoken constraints will only amplify their importance and lead to complaining or quitting by the team. Actually, the opposite is true. Unspoken and unacknowledged constraints and pressures rob the facilitator and the team of energy and enthusiasm.

Commitment by the facilitator can also be compromised when the facilitator fails to acknowledge a need to feel important as a consequence of working with VE or with a particularly prestigious client. When managed positively, a need for self-importance is funneled into focusing deeply on the client's needs, concerns, culture, and belief system and producing great results for the stakeholders. When managed negatively or ignored, self-importance can manifest itself as self-congratulatory speaking, boasting, and difficulty focusing on others' needs.

Function 2: Have deeper interactions

Internal Approaches

To have a deeper dialogue with the team, the facilitator has to choose a deeper goal or mission. Beyond saving money or making processes more efficient, VE consultants should have a bigger, more interpersonal mission as a way to increase emotional and cognitive energy and interpersonal skills. A grander, more interpersonal mission could be to guide the team safely with unflagging optimism, enjoyment, and commitment.⁸ Also, facilitators can make themselves and their teams aware of a sincere need for a deeper conversation, trust, openness. This wide-open process, initiated by and for the facilitator as well as the team, lets everyone know that their contribution is important and that the VE process is about more than cutting costs. It's about helping each other, learning, and deepening their personal worth to themselves and the organization.

A problem facilitators can have is the desire to have the right answer right away rather than to wait and listen to the team. Completely in the role of consultant, any person is tempted to give the "right answer" as fast as possible, thereby demonstrating competence and intelligence. To have a deeper, more passionate conversation with a team, consultants must inhibit this desire to "show what they know." Otherwise, in the excitement of having all the answers, consultants remain self-interested and may miss deeper messages coming from the team.

There are other ways to engage in deeper interactions:

Verbal Approaches

1. Ask probing and varied questions. Again, in a state of self-doubt or under pressure, consultants are tempted to talk. Too much. Better: ask varied, provocative, and interesting questions. The most skilled practitioners can ask a variety of provocative questions and wait for good answers patiently. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3. Types of Questions

scenario type: What if?
strategic type: How is that affecting your strategic goals? What is driving your success?
wh-type questions: who, what, when, where, why?

Figure 3. Types of Questions continued

bottom line type: What was the impact on your bottom line?
chronological type: What happened first/next/last?
comparison type: How does that compare to your competition/previous year's results?
consequences type: What problems did that cause for you?
emotional type: How does that make you feel? Was that frustrating/exciting/challenging?
impact/implication type: What problems are being caused by your current problems?
logic type: If that is true, then is X true as well?
needs-payoff type: Could you see the advantage of having help with X?
problem type: What problems are you having?
process type: how?
situation type: What are you currently doing?
superlative type: What is the most/best/worst problem that you are dealing with?

2. Anticipate and verbalize their concerns. During the pre-event, don't just collect project data. Collect people data: ask what they are worried about, what their constraints are, and what their pressures are. Find out if there are individual problems and concerns, even if they are in the minority. During the process, verbalize their concerns. For example, the consultant can say, "We have a concern in this room about the timing of this VE event. What can we do about that? I am concerned about it." This open acknowledgment relieves the facilitator from distracting thoughts about negative opinions and concerns in the room. It demonstrates to the team that the facilitator cares, is perceptive, and is courageous. Inhibited feelings in the room inhibit participation and productivity as well.
3. Listen for implied meanings. In wording or even tone of voice, team members are telling the facilitator how credible they found VE, their worries and hopes, and what changes they need. To build deeper interactions and energy in the room, the facilitator needs to address these signals. Say, "Although it's difficult, it's useful."
4. Test your perceptions. A drain on the energy and enthusiasm of VE consultants is the fear

that they are missing something that is going on in the room or misinterpreting what they perceive. Instead: they should test their perceptions on the team. Say, "I sense that you are getting very frustrated with this FAST diagramming. Is that right?"

5. Have genuine curiosity about them. For experienced consultants, a common approach can be to quickly diagnose and divide the team into types to deal with. Although this seems logical and effective, its downside is that it can both unnecessarily simplify and distance actual personal relationships with team members. It is better to continuously be interested in who the individuals are on the team and stimulate your curiosity about their lives and interests. Ask them general questions such as "How are you doing?" or "Are you excited about these ideas?"

Nonverbal approaches:

1. Convey constant openness. Openness results in high energy, stimulating conversation, and positive mutual feelings. Do more than say that you are open to their ideas. Here is a question consultants need to ask themselves: Am I open to them only insofar as they help me run the VE process? If the answer is yes, then check your motives for higher ones, including openness to them as people with lives outside of your session. Think about your higher goals, such as to make a difference in their lives or their work. Demonstrate openness. Stop talking when they talk. Don't answer their questions in a dismissive way. Open your body by gesturing widely and give them enormous amounts of eye contact to signal openness.
2. Be a little more flexible. Listen to what they want or need, and see if you can change yourself or the process to help them with their needs. The process is not more important than the people. The people have knowledge to consider and share, and the team enhances the process. The flexible facilitator can feel recharged by the experience of being flexible.
3. Monitor facial expression and eye contact. In the facilitators' attempts to concentrate and plan during a session, they forget that they are still communicating in front of the team. In this case, they may be communicating a disconnection with the team. Consultants need to monitor their facial expression and eye contact for

continually conveying openness, optimism, and involvement.

4. Monitor tension: In an effort to please and/or control, a facilitator may become quite tense. This tension looks to the team like uncertainty, doubt, and reluctance to work with them, even though the consultant may intend none of these things. The consultant should take frequent breaks and reduce personal pressure by reminding him- or herself that the focus of the session is on the team members, not the consultant. Tension can be re-focused as excitement or enthusiasm. Use emotion-based words and convey with facial expression messages such as "I'm excited about your ideas." Play brief games with the team both to dispel your tension and to give them a break from the pressure to succeed as well.

BOTTOM LINE POINT

The consultant and the team's commitment and energy for the VE process depend a lot on you. Beyond leading them through a process, the

consultant is leading them through an experience with both intellectual and emotional components. When the consultant effectively manages these components, everyone benefits, including the consultant. Besides tangible results such as idea generation, the consultant is capable of creating the realization of intangible results that lead to long-term investment by the team and stakeholders.

FOOTNOTES

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