



# Tom Romito

## FACILITATOR

### **FACILITATION AND SKILLFUL DISCUSSION**

I'm Tom Romito. I'm a facilitator and I work with organizations that want to improve themselves. This short paper is about how organizations can achieve clarity in words and thought with the help of a facilitator.

Many organizations waste time because they can't agree on anything. Maybe your organization is like this. A way to overcome this problem is skillful discussion. I borrowed it from "The Fifth Discipline Handbook" by Peter Senge. Skillful discussion can help a group of people achieve clarity in words and thought, which in turn, will help them reach consensus and make decisions in the shortest possible time. There are four factors in practicing skillful discussion.

First, the leader of the organization, whether he or she is the CEO of a corporation or the president of a grass-roots non-profit organization, must be invested in improving the organization. It should go without saying that the leader must also be present at all meetings where skillful discussion is going to occur.

Second, a consistent, critical mass of committed people must be involved in the effort. This means that, as often as possible, the same people should attend the meetings. This is because skillful discussion is a technique people only learn through practice. The more often they work together on issues, the better they are going to communicate with each other.

Third, everyone must treat each other as colleagues. They must all have immunity from retribution from anyone in the meeting, regardless of what they say. As Roger Schwartz points out in his book, "The Skilled Facilitator," they must be willing to discuss the undiscussable. That means that they must be willing to address issues they would rather avoid. Otherwise, they will never get to the real causes of problems, which will just continue to fester and impede effective decision-making.

As an example of this third factor, I have facilitated work groups where we got to action planning and nobody took responsibility for any work items except the leader. I said, "Am I to understand that nobody except Mary is willing to do anything?" Then, slowly, the hands started to go up and people took charge of getting things done. People must treat each other colleagues and pull their own weight if the organization is going to survive.

Fourth, everyone must be willing to raise questions that don't have hard and firm answers. Here are some examples of those kinds of questions:

- What led you to have that point of view?
- How did you arrive at that conclusion?
- When we use that term, what are we saying?
- What do we agree on, and what do we disagree on?

In summary, skillful discussion will help your organization make quality decisions quickly.