

Facilitative Leadership

**The Art of Holding Space
for Transformation**

By Gretel Bakker

Over the many years of working in the field of transformation, I have formed the opinion that facilitative leadership is not just a skill, it's an art; a way of being, and a constant act of self-awareness, self-regulation, and attuning to and navigating others. From high-stakes boardroom discussions to deeply personal leadership transformations, facilitative leadership has been at the heart of my work. It's not about control or authority; it's about unlocking potential, holding space for discomfort, and guiding people towards clarity and action.

Adam Kahane's concept of *Facilitating Breakthrough* resonates deeply with me because it acknowledges the complexity, the messiness, and the reality of leading in today's world. This approach, which balances power and love, is not about finding a perfect harmony but rather about working within tensions and contradictions. Facilitation is not neat, and it's rarely linear—but that's exactly why it works.





Facilitative Leadership Begins with Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation

One of the biggest lessons I've learned is that facilitation starts with me. Before I can create a space for others, I need to understand how I show up in a room, how I handle tension, and how I manage my own emotional responses.

Self-awareness in facilitation means:

- Knowing when my biases or assumptions might be shaping a conversation.
- Recognising the moments when I want to intervene but choosing instead to let the group struggle.

Self-regulation is equally crucial. So, over time, I've learned to:

- **Hold silence when needed.** Silence can be uncomfortable, but it can also be powerful. Sometimes, the best thing I can do as a facilitator is resist the urge to fill the space.
- **Stay present in difficult moments.** Whether it's an argument between colleagues or a leader breaking down under pressure, facilitation requires emotional steadiness.
- **Listen to what is emerging between perspectives.** Facilitation isn't just about hearing individual voices - it's about tuning in to the patterns, tensions, and unspoken dynamics that arise when different perspectives interact. This requires active listening not just to what is said, but to what is left unsaid, how ideas build or clash, and where the group's collective energy is flowing.
- **Balance authority with openness.** People look to facilitators for guidance, but that doesn't mean having all the answers. Creating structure without imposing my own agenda is a key foundation for good facilitation.

Facilitation at the Team Level: Holding the Space for Transformation

I remember a moment early in my career when a heated discussion erupted in a leadership team I was working with. Tensions ran high, and my instinct was to smooth things over. But something held me back. Instead of rushing in, I waited. The group sat in the discomfort, and slowly, something shifted. People started listening deeply, reflecting, adjusting and moving toward a solution that came from multiple perspectives. It was a powerful reminder that tension isn't always a problem to solve; sometimes, it's what moves us forward.

Facilitation at the team level is about creating environments where people feel safe enough to sit in the tension, challenge, reflect, and grow. This means ensuring:

- Everyone is heard. When the loudest voices dominate, the role in facilitative leadership is to gently bring in those who are more hesitant to speak.
- Psychological safety exists alongside accountability. People should feel free to express themselves, but they should also be willing to own their part in the process.
- Dialogue is grounded in curiosity rather than defensiveness.
- Sitting in the tension is productive. Not all conflict is bad - when managed well, it fuels creativity and leads to better decision-making.
- Rather than rushing toward solutions, allowing space for deeper insights to emerge.
- As a facilitator, I adapt my tone, pace, and approach to match shifting dynamics.

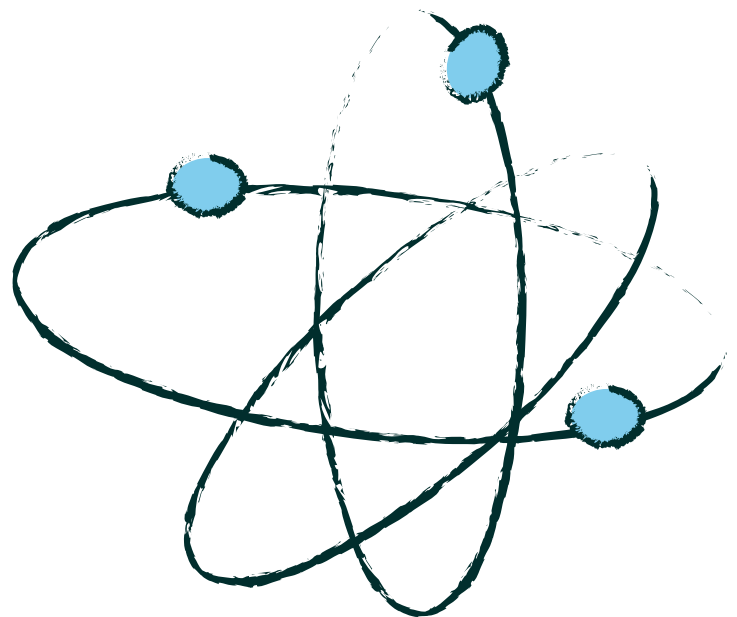
One of the most satisfying moments in facilitation is when you witness teams move from stagnation to action, from resentment to trust, and from uncertainty to alignment. And sometimes, the most transformative moments come when you can step back and let the team take ownership of the process. When people contribute, they invest more in outcomes.

Facilitation at the Systemic Level: Engaging with Complexity

Beyond the team, facilitation takes on an even greater challenge: helping entire organisations, industries, or communities navigate systemic complexity. Over the years, I've facilitated multi-stakeholder dialogues where:

- Competing interests must find common ground.
- Deep-rooted power dynamics need to be surfaced and addressed.
- People with vastly different backgrounds, perspectives, and intentions must collaborate towards shared solutions.

Systemic facilitation requires a different mindset - it's about seeing patterns, understanding interdependencies, and helping people engage with the messiness of real change. It's not about rushing to solutions but about helping groups sit with uncertainty long enough to find meaningful ways forward. In this uncertain space, groups can surface multiple, often competing, perspectives while holding them lightly; recognising that each perspective holds a piece of the truth, but none can fully capture the whole picture on its own.



Embracing Change Through Facilitation

Reflecting on my journey, I've come to see that change doesn't always happen in grand gestures - it often unfolds in small, intentional steps. Facilitative leadership embraces this reality, recognising that **true transformation is not about forcing outcomes but about creating the right conditions for them to emerge**. It means trusting that small changes, when consistently nurtured, lead to meaningful shifts over time. It's about fostering an environment where decision-making is shared, rather than centralised, and where deep listening helps unearth collective wisdom. Through experience, I've learned that the most powerful facilitation doesn't come from having all the answers but from creating space for others to explore, wrestle with uncertainty, and ultimately find their own way forward.

Facilitation embraces change as a natural process. A few guiding principles include:

- Incremental steps can create larger systemic transformation.
- Outcomes aren't always predictable, but alignment with purpose creates meaningful progress.
- Power and decision-making should be shared rather than concentrated.
- Wisdom emerges from many voices, not just the loudest ones
- Discomfort is where the real work happens. If people are too comfortable, they're probably not growing.
- Facilitation is a practice, not a destination. After all these years, I'm still learning, adapting, and refining my approach.



Conclusion

Facilitative leadership is both an art and a responsibility—an ever-evolving dance between structure and spontaneity, guidance and surrender. It is not about orchestrating every step but about creating a rhythm that allows others to move freely, to find their own way forward. Whether working with individuals, teams, or entire systems, the heart of facilitation lies in unlocking new ways of thinking, strengthening relationships, and shaping the conditions for meaningful change. True facilitation does not seek to erase complexity or tidy up the messiness of human interaction. Instead, it leans into the chaos, embraces the unknown, and trusts in the wisdom that emerges when people come together with openness and intent. The moments of greatest transformation are rarely those where the facilitator has all the answers but rather where space is held for the group to discover insights for themselves.

As I look ahead, I know that both facilitation and I will continue to evolve. Yet some things remain unchanged—the magic of creating spaces where people step into their fullest potential, the beauty of co-creation, and the power of deep listening. The future is not something to be dictated; it is something we build together, moment by moment, conversation by conversation. Through this practice of learning, adapting, and embracing the unknown, facilitation becomes more than a method—it becomes a way of being.



Facilitative Forms for Leadership

Facilitation is a dynamic and ever-evolving practice, where the methods we choose can spark creativity, deepen engagement, and foster meaningful collaboration. The key lies in selecting approaches that resonate with the group's needs; whether it's structured dialogue to ensure every voice is heard, decision-making tools that balance inclusivity with efficiency, or problem-solving techniques that invite innovation. Some activities bring energy and spontaneity, while others provide quiet space for reflection and deeper thinking. The magic happens when facilitation moves beyond process and becomes an immersive experience that ignites curiosity, nurtures participation, and unlocks new ways of seeing and working together. Below are some examples of immersive experiences that can be used when facilitating teams.

For facilitating inclusion, reflection, and generating possibilities:

Structured Dialogue Activities such as *World Café*, *Round-Robin* Sharing ensure that every voice is heard, while *Think-Pair-Share* allows participants to refine their ideas before bringing them to the larger group. Socratic Dialogue encourages deeper reflection through open-ended questioning, and *Appreciative Inquiry* shifts the focus toward strengths and possibilities rather than simply addressing problems.

For facilitating thinking, observing, and conflict and alignment:

Conflict Resolution and Team Alignment activities create space for navigating tensions constructively. The *Ladder of Inference* helps individuals examine their thought processes and assumptions, while *Press Play* and *Forum Theatre* enable team members to become "spect-actors" examining and contributing to solutions. **Social Contract Formation** ensures teams align on shared behaviours and expectations for collaboration.

For facilitating ideas and overcoming challenges:

Problem-Solving and Innovation Forms provide structured ways to generate and develop ideas. Brainwriting ensures contributions from all participants without the pressure of immediate verbal responses, while the *World Café* format encourages cross-pollination of ideas by rotating small-group discussions. The *Design Thinking* process offers a structured approach to tackling challenges through empathy, ideation, and experimentation.

For facilitating groups to self-organise, engage well, and make decisions:

Open Space Technology, a core facilitation form within *The Art of Hosting* framework is a powerful, participant-driven approach designed to enable groups of any size to self-organise around topics they care about, fostering deep engagement and creative problem-solving.

Decision-Making and Prioritisation activities like *Dot Voting* enable democratic decision-making, while tools such as the *Impact vs. Effort Matrix* help assess priorities based on feasibility and impact. Consensus-building techniques, such as *Fist to Five*, allow teams to gauge support and refine decisions collaboratively.

For facilitating considered feedback:

Reflection and Feedback Forms play a crucial role in continuous learning. The *After-Action Review* (AAR) encourages teams to reflect on what worked, what didn't, and how to improve. Stop-Start-Continue helps individuals and teams identify specific behaviours to adjust, while *Plus/Delta Feedback* highlights both positive aspects and areas for growth.



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