



## ***5 Ways to Manage the Group-Shadow and Keep Your Train On The Track!***

*by Kris Campbell*



Carl Jung spoke of the “shadow side” that exists in all people - a dark side of our personalities that represents our less social, less competent aspects. From experience, I’ve come to understand that groups also have a shadow side, which can erupt and act out. Once that happens, the Facilitator Train can fly off the tracks. And if we’re not prepared, we may not be able to salvage the trip.

**W**hen facilitating a group, I’ve had those truly great moments when all is going incredibly well. It’s like the rhythm of a train rolling down the tracks – an easy clickity-clickity when the pace is right, the flow of conversation is perfect and the destination clear. It’s a wonderful, exhilarating time. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi referred to these moments as “Flow”– and I’ve been fortunate to know “Facilitator’s Flow”.



I’ve also been on the other side of the tracks, the side where the archetype Jung called the “shadow side” resides. The experience is seldom enjoyable for the facilitator or the group.. The shadow is that archetypal dark side where people don’t want to go but, when forced or by accident find themselves there, commonly display a variety of reactions that can include anxiety, anger, fear, sadness. With these unpleasant emotions exposed, it is also common for people to “act out” in ways they never thought possible. Strong, silent types may raise their voices, more extroverted, verbal individuals may suddenly shut down.

**“When the shadow is finally released..., it has few boundaries.”**

When contradictory, often paradoxical behaviors rise to the surface in what a few minutes before had been a positive and productive group, it’s possible that you are experiencing the arrival of the group’s shadow side. This is a potential point of maturation for both the group and the facilitator -- how the shadow is managed may determine the life of the group.

The group and the facilitator can get through this event together, or the train can spin off the tracks. The shadow side can be destructive to the point that the group derails and ends up “off in the bushes”. Or the group can learn and grow from the shadow’s presence and pull from it the positive learning potential of examining more closely and challenging more bravely the thinking patterns and behaviors that have been ignored or misused in the past.

One of the reasons the shadow side is so disruptive is that it's most likely been bottled up. The issues associated with it may have become the group's 'undiscussables'. When the shadow is finally released or escapes, it has few boundaries.

I've seen both novice and seasoned facilitators fall victim to the shadow's onslaught, their groups ending up derailed, "off in the bushes". Startled, lost and tangled in emotional debris, this kind of a group-wreck is an ugly thing to experience.

I've been hit a few times by the shadow. Early in my career, I know there were times when I didn't manage it as well as I should have. It's been a long time now since I've lost a showdown with the shadow. From 22 years of experience, here are some pointers to help manage your group's shadow side.

## ***1. Don't assume the shadow side doesn't exist.***

Never go into a group facilitation unprepared for the possibility of the shadow's unruly behavior. Facilitation of a group is a tremendous challenge and requires strong skills, including the ability to anticipate problems. Managing the shadow side of your group means you need to tap into this anticipatory skill. You need to be able to imagine potential scenarios and how you'll handle them. This includes knowing how you'll respond verbally, physically, emotionally and cognitively. And remember - you have your own shadow side and your own buttons may get pushed. Staying calm is critical when the group's energy is escalating. They'll look to you as the role model of how to bring the group "back to center". On an airplane, all eyes go to the steward/ess when turbulence occurs to "get a read" on how to respond. As the steward of your group you too must be able to assure the group that the turbulence caused by the shadow is not terminal to the group and that they can and



will work through the rough ride and return to productive work.

## ***2. Preboarding -- Control the Trigger Points***

I've discovered that the strangest things can "set a group off" - things you may not have considered. So I've learned to "Preboard" as a facilitator -- to think about the things that *I can take care of ahead of time* - things *I can control* as the facilitator to make the environment in which the group works as positive and productivity-enhancing as possible.

***"The group's focus on an inappropriate trigger is often a first signal that something is brewing."***

I'll go to the mat over the lay-out of a room, the kind of tables used, the number of windows, the quality of refreshments, the amount of lighting and even the distance the group has to trek to find a restroom. Facilitation is challenge enough without adding what I call "trigger points" that can suddenly "set a group off". Once that happens, instead of focusing on the appropriate issue, task or process, the group will zero in on an inappropriate target like a heat-seeking missile -- that target could be the poor arrangement of the tables, the lack of ice water or the temperature of the room.

The group's shadow side seldom has the maturity or competence to point a finger at itself, so it quickly points to a trigger -- anticipate these triggers and get rid of or mitigate them.

Also, be reminded that groups don't spin out of control with no warning. The group's focus on an inappropriate trigger is often a first signal that something is brewing. Don't ignore the flare the group is sending up.

### 3. Downboarding - anticipating the fissures in the track.

Something as small as a penny won't derail your train -- but a break in the track can send it hurtling out of control. A facilitator, like the conductor of the train, is responsible for having both the focus and the skill to anticipate what's coming down the track. Literally, it's a facilitator's job to anticipate for the group what might be coming around the next corner should they choose a certain course of action.

“The skill of remaining hypervigilant is often under-developed in novice facilitators.”

During facilitation, I *never* relinquish my hypervigilance of a past-present-future orientation. Nothing requires more mental stamina in facilitation than this. From the time I enter the facilitation relationship I am constantly thinking about where the group has **been**, what they are **currently doing** and where they **are going**. This thought process happens almost simultaneously. With this constantly rolling radar it's nearly impossible for the shadow to sneak up for a surprise attack.

The only time I've been caught off guard was when I abandoned my trusted hypervigilance. The skill of remaining hypervigilant is often under-developed in novice facilitators. I've seen the shadow attack and spin a group out of control when a novice facilitator “drifts off” and loses their connection to the group. And while it's imperative to remain hypervigilant, you must be *subtle* in your surveillance. Strong, self-directed groups who are doing well don't want to be too aware of the facilitator's constant scanning. It can become an irritant or another trigger point. And a weaker, less mature group may chafe under the heavy hand of an over-vigilant facilitator. Our ultimate skill is to be invisible, yet visible, in what we do.

### 4. Beware the shadow-group on a mission!

Once in a while you may find you are facilitating a very unique group, one with an agenda all its own. These are functioning yet highly self-destructive groups who are out to activate their own negative self-fulfilling prophesy. These groups live near their shadow side every day. Typically, turnover in the group is high except for a few core, tough-skinned members who've learned to survive. This group often views itself as “underdogs”, the “black sheep” or the “bad-news-bears” and, for all their anger and grouching, are out to live up to their script.

“Unless the identification with self-destructiveness is managed first, the long-term life of the group is at risk.”

The shadow seldom jumps out to surprise you with this group -- it's sitting in the middle of the group as a member right from the beginning. Initially, I usually recognize the presence of the shadow in the language-of-blame the group speaks.

With a group like this, a facilitator must first deal with the obvious -- the group's self-image and need to “live down” to their expectations. The self-destruction is a reflection of the depth of pain the group is in. Unless the identification with self-destructiveness is managed first, the long-term life of the group is at risk. It would be useless for the facilitator to attempt to focus on lofty group goals when the real issue for the group is basic survival.



## 5. The Shadow Teaches

Observe the shadow-behaviors and then assist the group, as well as yourself, in learning from what is happening “in the moment”. We can learn not only from whatever issue has initiated the shadow effect, but how everyone in the room, including yourself, is reacting to it. Typically you are being given the opportunity to view a microcosm snapshot of what happens in everyday work life. You and the group are not going to solve the issue at this point. Elevating the shadow to the surface, looking at it, poking it, getting more comfortable with it and learning not to be afraid of it can be a huge step! Remember - you make the facilitation room a Safe Room to allow the group to investigate and experience things they might not approach otherwise.

### “The number one rule for facilitation of a shadow event - Stay Calm.”

Also, keep in mind that you are the primary role model in this situation. If you display behaviors that reflect an uneasy and tense demeanor, the group may feel unsafe, panic and things will escalate. Or the group’s progress may grind to a numbing halt. The number one rule for facilitation of a shadow event - Stay Calm. Don’t allow the shadow to undermine your ability to aid the group right when they need guidance through a difficult time. Remember that in every shadow negative, there is *positive potential* for learning, especially when you, as the facilitator, can make the “undiscussable” now discussable and the unsafe now safe.



## Conclusion

As with all facilitation, it’s important to remind yourself not to take things personally. Because 99.9% of the time, it’s not about you.

“We need to be engaged, focused and genuinely attentive.”

Although it’s easy for the group’s shadow behavior to try and hook your own shadow side, this is a dark place for a facilitator to go. I’ve witnessed more than one facilitator leave a room angry and in tears. The shadow often looks for a target and you’re conveniently there. The process of facilitation demands that we be neutral, non-committal, fair-minded and unbiased.

At the same time, we need to be engaged, focused and genuinely attentive. You can’t be an effective, talented and accomplished facilitator and not have an open mind and heart. Because we strive to be open and genuine, it presents us with a unique challenge - not to allow the “slings and arrows” of shadow side behavior to pierce our good armor.

If you feel yourself going in that direction, simply repeat, “It’s not about me. It’s not about me.” And then refocus on who it IS about - the group.



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