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Perla, Keren

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# The Pledge, The Turn, and the Prestige

Re-imagining facilitation through trials of systemic design for public policy

**By Keren Perla** B.A., M.A.  
Director, Foresight and Design  
Alberta Energy  
Keren.Perla@gov.ab.ca

## Abstract

As the experiment with systemic design for public policy continues to grow, those who call ourselves facilitators – by trade – are found grappling with new approaches for guiding complex dialogue that both re-enforce the critical role of facilitation as well as challenge the fabric of ethics and values upon which the practice is founded. In this presentation we explore how facilitation of systemic design efforts, particularly where participants have limited appreciation of the underlying methodologies, necessitates a new understanding of the facilitator – one that expands and pushes the boundaries on core concepts such as *'impartiality'*, *'consensus decision-making'*, *'facilitator as process guide'*, *'results versus emergence'*, and *'process disclosure.'* Similar to a magician's code, these tenets have been critical for creating acceptance of and belief in facilitation to guide cultural change; however diversity and complexity in the field continues to proliferate. As such we argue that this destabilizing effect of systemic design provides an unmapped space to re-envision the traditional art of facilitation to not only better adapt the discipline to more diverse uses in geographical, political, organizational and community settings but provoke transformational responses and actions in today's legacy social systems.

## Keywords

*facilitation, systemic design, public policy, governments, civil service, ethics, values*

## Introduction

In late 2013, the provincial Government of Alberta initiated a formal pilot program for systemic design. Although resourced by its Department of Energy, the core design team was to focus on growing the use systemic design across the whole of government as a means to enhance work on complex policy issues and bridge creative ideas into the action. Largely experienced as a series of workshops, good facilitation has become a critical factor for ensuring participants viewed systemic design as a positive and productive experience and – by extension – build support for increased use of the approach on substantive policy initiatives. It has been observed that, in many instances, blocks to successful workshops have surfaced where trained facilitators have adhered to established values/ethics of developed taught to guide a facilitator's behaviour and assist with decision-making when guiding groups.

The purpose of this presentation is to explore specific value-based challenges experienced by trained facilitators adopting systemic design and the extent to which adapting or shifting the current values-base questions and broadens what many organizations have come to view as the role of facilitators.

To this end, we examine facilitation as three-stage act, exploring the rationale behind its values-based performance and identifying specific challenges that systemic design presents at each stage.

## The Scenario

The Government of Alberta is the first provincial government in Canada with a Systemic Design Team. This core team is responsible to advise on the application of the methodology, the design of the overall engagement sessions and to facilitate related workshops. Since its launch, the team has led over 60 workshops across a variety of policy topics. Workshops are defined as collaborative events, targeted internally with the civil service, as well as externally involving end users, partners and other actors to generate solutions, opportunities and insights through the use of design related tools or methods.<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that the use of systemic design for public policy reflects what is seen as the move of design from designing *solutions for* clients to designing *ideas with* clients (Katja SOINI, 2006).

While facilitation is a key competency for collaborative design, in North America facilitation itself has become a recognized discipline and profession with many in government organizations seeking formal training at the level of tools as well as theory and philosophy. There exist a number of different schools and frameworks citing professional values and ethics. This presentation utilizes the code of ethics developed by the International Association of Facilitators<sup>2</sup> to ground the discussion with a view to surface key considerations for adapting facilitation for design sessions.

## Facilitation – Understanding the Magician’s Trick

Christopher Nolan’s 2006 blockbuster *The Prestige* about the ongoing rivalry between two magicians opens with a narrator outlining the sequence of events by which a magic trick is performed:

“Every great magic trick consists of three parts.... **The Pledge.** The magician makes a promise and shows you something ordinary or unaltered: a deck of card, a bird, a man. **The Turn.** The magician takes the ordinary something and does something extraordinary...and while you’re looking for what happened you’re not really.... **The Prestige.** The hardest part of the magic trick, where you follow through on your promise and you bring it back.” (Cutter, *The Prestige*)

In many ways, this three-stage act aptly captures the mindset and methodology of traditional facilitation.<sup>3</sup> A facilitator comes before a group and pledges to help them work through a problem together. To do so, they take the group through the twists and turns of a masterfully crafted journey and finally they take the group back full circle to the initial problem with solution in hand, having delivered on their original promise.

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<sup>1</sup> The size of workshops can range from 10-50 people. There have been a few exceptions where workshops have targeted larger participation (60+). Increasingly, workshops must address a desire for online participation, through media like video conferencing, to bridge geographical distances.

<sup>2</sup> The International Association of Facilitators (IAF) is a participatory organization that sets internationally accepted industry standards, provides accreditation, and embraces the diversity of facilitators and methods around the world. <http://www.iaf-world.org/index.aspx>

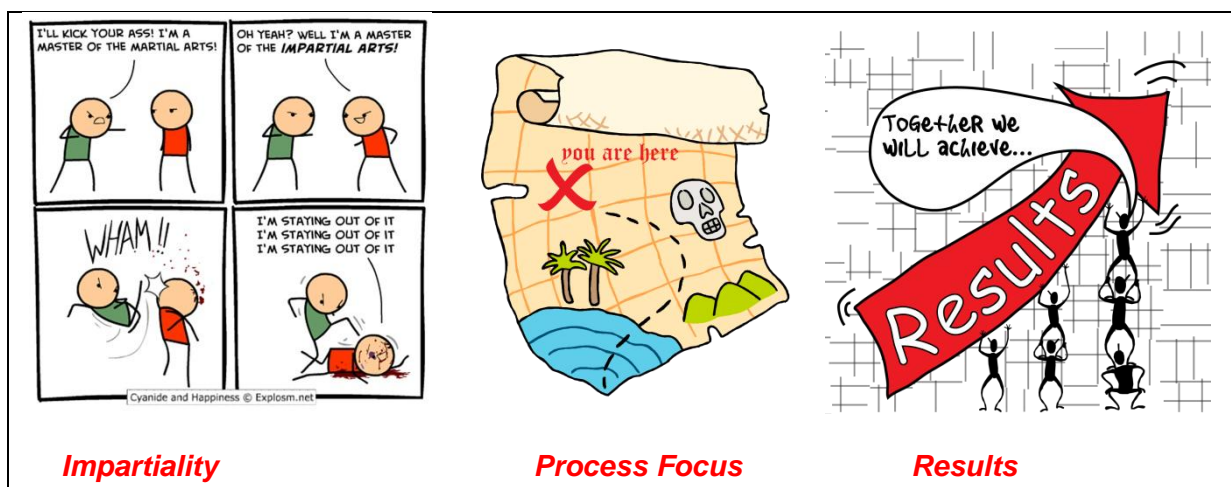
<sup>3</sup> “Traditional Facilitation” is used in this presentation to distinguish the predominant facilitative theories, techniques, and processes that are generally sought and valued by organizations such as governments. While there exists a diversity of approaches for facilitation, they are arguable connected as a practice at a values level.

In large institutions, such as governments, where resistance to change is particularly acute, the role of “in-house” facilitator can have significant tactical advantages for advancing systemic design within existing structures/processes. Where systemic design is seen as something new and unproven, facilitation is not. In many ways, the mantel of facilitation is a key vehicle for building early credibility and engaging the more sceptical, as well as a means for designers to subvert territorialism and be brought in as process experts on a broader range of projects.



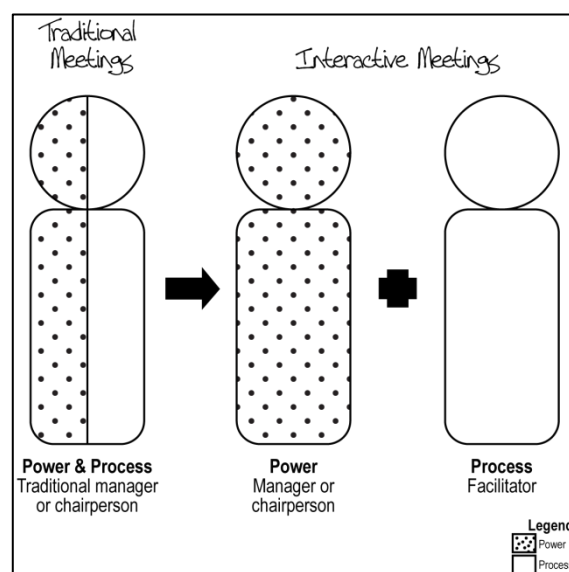
### The Systemic Design Challenge – Unravelling the Magician’s Trick

Traditionally, facilitators have been primarily valued and engaged for their ability to “visibly” demonstrate: 1) impartiality or neutrality 2) a process-focus and 3) results-orientation. While not a comprehensive picture of a facilitator’s code of practice, these particular aspects continue to be reflected across schools of practice and remain the primary areas of discussion. From an organizational perspective, grounding in these concepts has, to date, been critical for building trust with clients as well as distinguishing facilitators from other professionals such as managers, trainers and coaches who use facilitative techniques but operate from a different value set (Doyle and Straus, 1976).

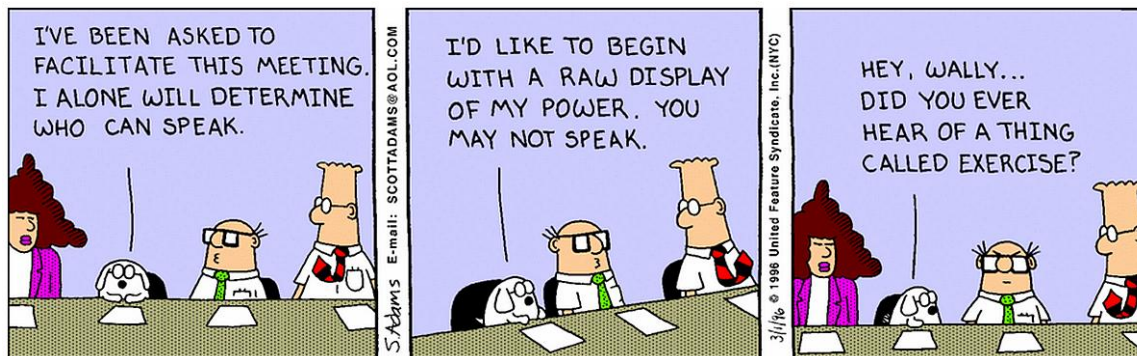


The Pledge: The Art of Impartiality

A commitment to be impartial is at the heart of the relationship a facilitator seeks to build at the outset of a session, the driving concept being that a facilitator will guide discussions but will not directly contribute to content or take part in decision-making. In *Understanding Facilitation: Theory and Principles*, Christine Hogan outlines the practical challenges faced by organizational leaders – as agenda leaders, subject matter experts and the main power holders – to be effective facilitators. Because the potential exists for groups to look to the facilitator for answers, there also exists a fear that a facilitator will reinforce this misconception and manipulate the outcomes of discussions. As such where truly interactive dialogue is sought these roles have traditionally been separated to ensure neutrality in interests and judgement. The need to be seen as “neutral” is then increased exponentially for facilitators internal to government organizations as they are often embedded in ministries responsible to deliver specific agendas.



Yet, in an organization, such as government, where most are unfamiliar with the mechanics of systemic design, ensuring a successful design session or workshop in fact requires often a facilitator to present as a subject matter expert, placing content once again under the purview of the facilitator. Because the process inherently asks participants to work in unfamiliar ways, challenge hidden assumptions and broaden their perspectives, a facilitator must often *nudge* and stimulate thinking by assessing and commenting on the content being put forward by participants in order to redirect groups to consider systems or design implications. Systemic design therefore elicits a new power dynamic for interactive dialogue, demanding facilitators to take on a hybrid role. For traditional facilitators the shift towards content is an ethical challenge, one with potential implications for gaining support to implement the results of workshops. Specifically, where *nudging* is successful, clients and participants may come to appreciate a higher value from the facilitator as a catalyst for more dynamic dialogue. However, nudging may also lower the likely that a group will implement what was created since the ideas may be viewed as originating with the facilitator.



### ***Facilitative Manipulation/ 'Facipulation'***

#### The Turn: A Focus on Process

The Turn, the second stage of a facilitator's performance, is a meticulously planned orchestration of techniques used to keep groups on track and progressing smoothly towards an agreed to end, the mechanics of which are only ever fully apparent to the facilitator. This is a facilitator's sleight of hand, and reflects a foundational belief that the process, and adherence to the process, is just as important as the results themselves. While a certain mental nimbleness is acknowledged as advantageous when the unexpected happens and can make the difference between success and failure, the traditional view is that "throwing out the plan" is the exception to the rule. At its core, a facilitator's preoccupation with process is about shaping *how* a group should advance forward – in a coherent and logical manner (Cruickshank and Evans, 2012).

The challenge in terms of facilitation for systemic design is twofold. First, traditional training conditions facilitators to look for and maximize "process gains" for a group as a whole, and conversely minimize the dysfunctional behaviour of individuals, or "process loss", that may impede movement toward the aim or goal set out for the group. This is a critical component of what has defined the "effectiveness" of a facilitator. However, in many ways it is a rejection of process gains and a valuing of dysfunctional behaviour, or divergence, that distinguishes systemic design as a group process (Leon Cruickshank and Martyn Evans, 2012). The effect of this shift is the creation of a number of eventualities that cannot be planned for in advance. Second, this shift creates a situation where the facilitator must be willing to walk on uncertain ground, uncertain for both facilitator and facilitated alike. In such a scenario, the potential of being caught off agenda without a go-forward plan brings into to question the credibility of a facilitator as the process expert in the room and their ability add value or improve a situation.

#### The Prestige: Getting Results

The Prestige has traditionally been the facilitator's final flourish, specifically about demonstrating to the group both the rational and emotional results that have been achieved by going through a facilitator's process. Facilitation, as it is perceived especially in the public sector, has evolved to meet the demand of groups needing to achieve clear and precise goals, propelling much of the training and practice to be geared at becoming "business proof". Systemic design, on the other hand, has been touted within the public sector as process for innovation. Its value proposition and appeal for public policy is based on its ability to generate creative ideas and breakthroughs. Because this is likely something not seen before, the outcomes of systemic design are inherently not predictable. As such, what this is cannot be set out and planned for in advance because there are too many unknown. Within the public sector, where time itself has become a commodity, the promise of emergence



without understanding even the form it might take brings its own challenges for identifying clients willing to support the process, redirect resources, and remain flexible in terms of ultimate results.

## Lessons Learned for Systemic Design Facilitation

Since the launch of Government of Alberta's pilot program, systemic design has been adapted for use across a broad field social, economic and natural resource policy and strategy projects. Throughout these sessions, systemic design increasingly demands experimentation with new approaches for the facilitation to better enable collaborative innovation that meets existing and future business needs. The following are lessons learned specific to the facilitation of systemic design work based on the outcome of workshops to date designed and facilitated by the core team.

### Ground Hybridity in Neutrality

Systemic design facilitators should obtain upfront *permission* to play a hybrid role in the session (as a guide for process and content). However, a facilitator will continue to benefit from a visible orientation towards a significantly more neutral stance than other participants. In this space, practiced co-facilitation has demonstrated an innate ability to diffuse and counteract the perception of manipulation/'facipulation' by preventing any one facilitator from dominating discussions and group activities. Interventions should always be made as a last case scenario only after a group has experienced a lengthened stall and the facilitator has paused to gauge their assumptions and motivation for intervening. Further, where comments on content are abstracted through the use of models or observable patterns of the system being explored, the more neutral this guidance will likely be perceived.

### Yield to a Logic of Unfolding

As a process to generate innovative thinking and unearth new ideas, one of the aims of systemic design is to help problem-solvers reframe their views of the world and the issue at hand. Dysfunctional behaviour or thinking that challenges a facilitator's process should also be reframed from something that must be contained to something that is key for providing insights where a group should be diverted to explore new mysteries and/or aspects of a system. As such a facilitator must shift their focus from managing a singular process to maximizing the potentiality of the environment – the interaction of people and space.<sup>4</sup> The effectiveness of a systemic design facilitator is then measured not against how smoothly they can take groups from A to B, but on their ability to use divergent thinking and shift the technique, process, agenda, and outcomes in way that can compel a group to break from mental traps and conventional thinking.

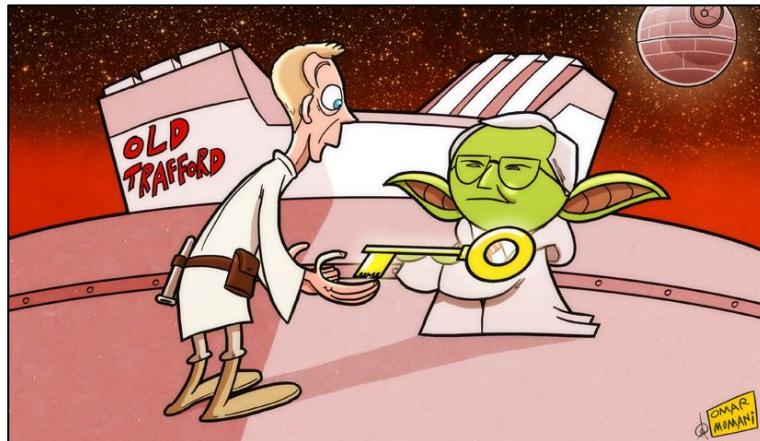
### Provide Full Disclosure

With creative processes, a facilitator's role must continue to focus on enabling participants to feel comfortable upon uncertain ground (Cruickshank and Evans, 2012). In more traditional settings, facilitators keep process disclosure to high-level outlines, preferring more instantaneous reactions to helps surface deep-seated issues. However, where the facilitator is looking to maximize the environment for creativity, full disclosure on what *could be* discussed and the logic of *how* a tool or technique will help participants consider the issue from a 'systemic' or 'designerly' lens can enhance the ability of the group itself to respond in more helpful ways. It further increases the potential for

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<sup>4</sup> A detailed picture of the logic of unfolding draws strongly from discussions on *The Art of War*, as presented in *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking*.

participants to offer up other models to support discussion and to become more self-directed in their exploration of issues.

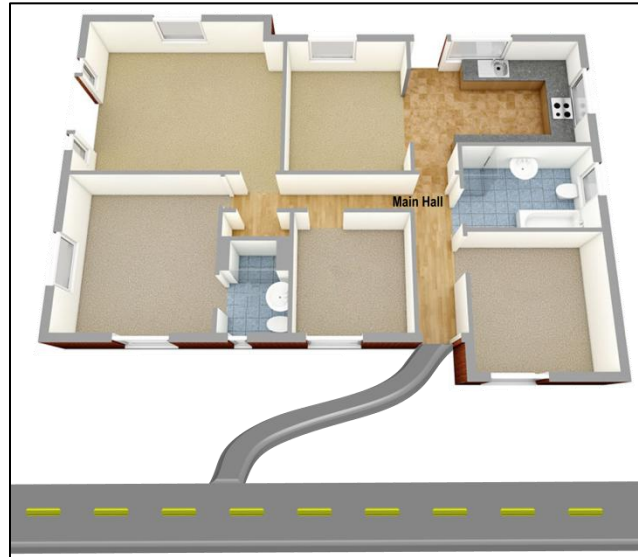


**Roadside Yoda**

#### Proactively Build Creative Frameworks

Because of how much of systemic design work is emergent, effective facilitation must address the challenge of who in fact is the client directing the final outcome. In government organizations, this is often experienced as the tension between the interests of project sponsors and executives who want concrete progress on what they see as the critical issues and project participants who are likely to reframe this within the workshop space. While this continues to be an ongoing area for discussion in the International Association of Facilitator's Code of Ethics, to deliver a successful systemic design session the answer is clear and conflicting. The direction of both must be acknowledged and accommodated within the workshop space, requiring facilitators to manifest two very different types of results – products for immediate business needs and new ideas. Ultimately, this means that a facilitator must move beyond designing a unilateral process by which groups will work through a problem, and shift to creating frameworks for creativity that can achieve a suite of results.





### *From Designing Roads to Houses*

A simple metaphor for the process to framework shift is the difference between designing a straight road (to go from A to B) and designing a house (multiples ways to go from A – entrance – to B – exit). Both are ways of moving through a problem space. However, within a house there are interconnected spaces where participants can walk through – simultaneously exploring master bedrooms as well as marginal areas – essentially allowing people to explore the problem space via different vantage points and perspectives.

The essential structure for integrating this approach for facilitation includes:

- **'Fuzzy' front-end goals** – Where necessary a facilitator must work with project sponsors to help shape ambiguous goals that will not blind groups to opportunities for reframing or innovation.
- **Meaningful spaces** – while traditional facilitation values the role of space and place, this is exponentially increased for systemic design workshops. Where the physical environment allows for independent, tactile and visual exploration the potential for reframing is expedited.
- **Options for exploring** – An element of choice should be provided to participants for how they will explore issues (i.e. tools, models, etc.). Rule breaking should also be encouraged. Prescriptive approaches may in fact encourage them back into familiar comfortable patterns of thinking.
- **Touch Stone (the sponsor's goal)** – Using a sponsor's goal as a touchstone allows for feedback and progress on the original goal and an ability to assess the value of what is further being recommended by a group.



*“Being able to provide a suite of results means we are no longer concerned with pulling an ordinary rabbit out of the hat. Business needs and innovation, taken together require us to deliver a ‘super’ version of outcomes that reflect a ‘yes...and’ philosophy. This is the extra-ordinary factor by which systemic design is often.”*

## Conclusions

Efforts to embed systemic design as a core mode of thinking and working within a government organization must contend with a culture that acknowledges systemic design as critical for innovation, yet functionally reflects hierarchical structures/processes and bias towards the analytical mindset. While there are groups within the civil service that are supportive and willing to experiment with new and different approaches for policy and strategy, positioning systemic design primarily as a group process has been a useful “Trojan Horse” strategy for motivating and engaging a wider range of audiences. That said, whether a design team is external or internal to government, one of the main challenges of systemic design projects revolves around ensuring continuity of the approach throughout the lifecycle of a project. Specifically, this encompasses the necessary handoff of workshop results from the facilitators trained in systemic design back to sponsors and project leaders that are not, as well as the challenge of socializing the experience and results of systemic design workshops with the broader organization that did not participate in the process. At issue is the need to take ideas from the workshop space out into the lived environment to be tested and iterated, and to do so by working with the existing machinery of a government.

To the degree that systemic design challenges the traditional value proposition of facilitators, it creates a new and expanded role for design facilitators, requiring new competencies in mentorship, strategy development and various content lenses. It is this expanded skillset that now sees design facilitators within government operating in more diverse ways to guide and advise on pathways for clients to bridge between the ideation space (workshops) and traditional business terrains (processes and culture). The potential of designer as facilitator will continue to be mapped, as early experiences highlight conditioning that can bypass issues of territoriality and ownership and is a growing example of how design can spark and facilitate pervasive organizational change. Work still continues to develop case studies for exploring the advantages of design facilitation for navigating the interface between the public and external communities to re-imagine current thinking around engagement for policy development.



*“Having used facilitation as a Trojan Horse to proliferate the use of systemic design, the design facilitator becomes a Sherpa for government organizations helping to translate the foreign language of systemic design and guiding exploration into this new terrain.”*

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