

The Facilitator's Dilemma

I really loved Rebecca's post on [what she learned from facilitating our strategic planning process](#) this past Fall. I want to riff on a point she made about the facilitator's dilemma of sticking with the schedule versus letting conversations happen. Rebecca wrote:

I sometimes got visibly anxious when one of our three-hour sessions was clearly not going to result in the outcome I'd designed towards. In one particularly tense moment, Eugene turned to me and said "Rebecca, I know we are not going to finish the roadmap as you planned, but this conversation is important, and we need to have it. This is what needs to happen."

And of course, he was right. In the months since those intense strategy conversations, I have seen the benefits of those complex conversations unfold.

"Of course" is a bit generous. It's not possible to know in the moment.

One of our core values is around the importance of holding tensions, or as we like to describe it, embracing the "and." We see this challenge crop up all the time in our everyday work and lives.

Facilitators often need to balance the tension between getting through an agenda and taking the time to have a discussion that needs to happen. We see this situation all the time. A client might say, "We want to get these three things done in this 90-minute meeting," but as you start leading the discussion, it becomes apparent that the group is not aligned around something fundamental and that nothing will get done if that alignment doesn't happen.

So you have to make a choice. You could step back and try to

get the group aligned first, possibly at the expense of getting through the desired goals. Or, you could push through and hope that the process of working through the agenda gives you that alignment.

There is no easy answer, although there's a good guiding principle: If lack of alignment is preventing you from achieving your goals, getting aligned has to become the priority. If you can reach alignment and achieve the expected goals, great. If you reach alignment, but don't get to the goals, you've still done your job.

We tested poor Rebecca a number of times throughout our process. She was great at managing flow, but I could sometimes detect her anxiety when we got bogged down and still had a lot to get done. I could see the thought bubble in her head asking, "What's the right move? Should I kick their butts and keep things moving, or should I let them work through the issue?"

The right answer is often, but not always, to kick our butts. I think Rebecca's made the right decision for us each time throughout the process, even if she sometimes questioned it. In one of our debriefs, Kristin shared this insight:

So much of the value of a consultant is just facilitating, mirroring, synthesizing, and recording the conversation. And we, the client, go as far as we can go. And we can't go much faster.

There's so much wisdom embedded in this statement. We, as consultants, want to push our clients, but we can only push so far before it becomes counterproductive. Knowing the limit is hard, but the first step is acknowledging that there is a limit.