

The Skillful, Intentional Practitioner

Last week, our team was preparing for our September [Delta Dialogues](#) meeting. As part of our standard preparation, we went over the room layout and discussed how we wanted to configure it. We had arranged in advance for a room that was configurable (movable chairs and tables) and that had a projector and screen. The room was rectangular in nature, with the screen on the shorter wall of the room. The natural thing to do would have been to arrange the chairs in a tall U-shape around the screen.

[Kristin](#) objected. A tall U, she argued, was less intimate than a wide U, and it would be harder for participants on the side to see the screen. She suggested that we bring a portable screen and from this [list of projectors](#) and set up the room so that the screen was along the longer wall.

Initially, I hedged. This would add at least 30 minutes to our setup (which would mean losing 30 minutes of valuable sleep), and it would require us to transport our large, bulky screen two hours to Sacramento in our relatively small car. Despite my strong belief in the importance of power of space in group process, I did not want to do this. Our meeting was going to be long and complicated as it was, and I didn't want to make it even more complicated.

I decided to compromise. I proposed that we bring the screen and arrive 30 minutes earlier, but that we make the final decision when we actually saw the room. The team agreed.

The following day, we arrived at the site, and we tried the simpler, tall-U arrangement. Kristin took a look, and she was adamant. "We need to go with the wide U." I felt myself resist, because I didn't want to go through the trouble, but

she was right. We were prepared for the possibility, and it was the better solution, so I assented.

We went to work clearing out tables, rearranging the room, and setting up the projector and our screen (then deciding that the wall would be better). It was as big of a pain as I thought it would be. And, it was absolutely the right decision.

You can see how the room was arranged below. The room felt intimate, but not crowded. Everyone could see the screen clearly, and throughout the meeting, they engaged with it often. We ended up having a very strong meeting, probably the strongest of the process so far. Obviously, a lot of factors contributed to that (a strong design, superb facilitation from Kristin and [Jeff Conklin](#), great support from [Rebecca](#), a skillful, committed set of participants), but the space played a huge role.



We talk a lot about what it means to be a skillful

practitioner in this business. Many of our conversations are around the question, “How much is enough?” As my friend and mentor, [Gail Taylor](#), always asks, “What’s the difference that will make a difference?”

Was the space arrangement the difference that made the difference last Friday? Kristin clearly thought so, and I ended up agreeing, although I don’t have any quantifiable ways of justifying that. We both have a lot of experience and qualitative wisdom that we can draw on, but nothing definitive that “proves” anything.

The projects we take on are usually large and complex, with thousands of different variables and limited time and resources. We have to decide – often on the fly – what choices we can make that will make the biggest impact. We have explicit rules of thumb that we draw on, but we largely depend on our instincts. Often, our best decisions are when we choose *not* to do something, when we demonstrate skillful restraint. This is especially critical on big projects, when a large budget can pressure you to do more, whether or not it will actually be better.

You can’t ever definitively know what the right moves are, certainly not in advance. That’s okay, because it’s not ultimately what matters. To me, being skillful is not about being right. It’s about *being intentional*. It’s about always understanding *why* you’re making a choice, even if that understanding is vague or even wrong.

One of the hallmarks of our meeting processes is storytelling, which often manifests itself in [taking photographs](#). Taking good pictures is hard, and a more sophisticated camera in the hands of a novice just makes it harder. If I think a project will require expert photography, I’ll add a photographer to our team. Absent that, it’s not fair for me to expect that our team members be experts at photography along with all of the other skills they need to have. What I expect is for our team

members to be thoughtful and intentional about the craft.

For someone doing this for the first time, the intention might simply be, "Have some record of the meeting." For someone who's done it a few times, the intention might evolve into, "People like seeing pictures of themselves, so try to make sure every participant is captured." The intention might continue to evolve into things like, "Use a zoom lens, so you're not disrupting conversation," "Don't use flash, because it washes out the picture," or "When taking group shots, focus on a single individual to tell a more intentional story."

The intention itself is not as important as the act of acting with intention. When you are clear on why you're doing something, you now have a basis from which to learn. This intentionality should apply to *all* aspects of the craft. That doesn't mean you have to be an expert at everything. It means you need to be thoughtful about everything. It means that you need to approach everything with a learning mindset and a desire to constantly improve. It's why we always say, "Be intentional, and hold it lightly."

On the drive up to Sacramento before our meeting last Friday, Jeff asked us why we had languaged the opening question the way we had. Each of us had slightly different perspectives, which resulted in a spirited debate. It's impossible to know if our end result was the "best" result. But I definitely know that we were all clear on the *intention* behind that opening question and the reasons for why we framed it the way we did. At the end of the day, that attention to intention is what makes us skillful at our practice.