

Book Review Essay

Miki Kashtan, *The Highest Common Denominator: Using Convergent Facilitation to Reach Breakthrough Collaborative Decisions*, Fearless Heart Publications, Oakland, Calif., 2020, 331 pp, ISBN 978-0-9900073-5-7 (paperback), price \$20.00, index.¹

Reviewed by **Richard House**

Regular readers will know that Miki Kashtan writes a regular column for this magazine, and this, her latest book, deserves the widest possible readership within the Humanistic Psychology and facilitation fields. I have been fortunate enough to work with Miki in a facilitation context, and I don't hesitate in saying that along with Humanistic Psychology elder Jill Hall, she is the most brilliant facilitator I've worked with in nearly four decades of involvement in the human potential movement. As one of the book's endorsers has it, Miki is 'a master facilitator who is constantly learning'.

In this her fourth book, we read that Miki is a practical visionary pursuing a world that works for all, based on principles and practices rooted in feminist non-violence. Miki is a founding member of the Nonviolent Global Liberation community (NGLcommunity.org), a co-founder of Bay Area Nonviolent Communication (BayNVC.org), a certified trainer with the Center for Nonviolent Communication, and has taught, consulted and engaged with projects globally. Hundreds of her posts can be accessed on her *Fearless Heart* website. She has chosen vagabonding in search of learning about liberation and community, and holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California at Berkeley.

On the book's back cover, we read the question, 'What if you could bring together any group of people to find solutions that are creative, satisfying, work for everyone, and actually get implemented?' – moving towards 'a world that works for all – one meeting at a time'. The decision-making process outlined in the book privileges trust-building from the outset, drawing out concerns and addressing them, and

turning conflicts into dilemmas that groups then solve together, with a group's creativity finding solutions that no one even knew existed. Sound too good to be true? – the group facilitator's Holy Grail? Well, having worked with Miki, I think this is the nearest thing you'll find in the literature to that Holy Grail. As Skeena Rathor and Gail Bradbrook write in their foreword, this book offers the prospect of moving beyond what is the common experience of 'endless meetings where decisions don't get made, or decisions get made that are compromises that deflate everyone, or power moves are made that force decisions on others without their buy-in'.

Kashtan is careful to emphasise that the book is not a facilitation primer per se – though she adds later that 'This book contains all that I am currently aware of knowing about group facilitation' (p. 31) – adding the bold and encouraging claim that 'if you wanted to apply my facilitation methods, you could do so after reading this book without needing to attend any training' (ibid.).

The Convergent Facilitation (CF) approach brings a depth of wisdom and understanding that is held in Indigenous traditions, and in the foreword, we read of First Nations Canadian Jeannette Armstrong (Okanagan) describing the Okanagan process of *En'owkin* that's used to sort through difficult decisions:

The point of the process is... to understand as much as possible the reasons for opposite opinions. Your responsibility is to see the views of others, their concerns and their reasons, which will help you to choose willingly and intelligently the steps that will create a solution – because it is in your own

best interest that all needs are addressed in the community.

Described as a ‘handbook for reaching breakthrough collaborative decisions using the process of Convergent Facilitation’, Kashtan lists a number of contexts in which CF has worked around the world – including working with long-time enemies inhabiting polarised positions, creating new legislation with bipartisan support, and setting up effective collaborative leadership structures in not-for-profit organisations. The tried-and-tested CF approach works with generating solutions that integrate everyone’s needs and concerns yet *without requiring compromise*; positively *welcoming* (‘just enough’) dissent (pp. 30–1) and ‘failures’, and engaging with them constructively; and attending to the power differences that can so easily stymie collaborative functioning. In her preface, we read that it was a breakthrough moment for her when she had the insight that ‘focusing on inviting dissent is key to efficient collaboration’ (pp. 13–14).

Some conventional group-facilitation ‘wisdoms’ certainly get taken on here – for example, challenging approaches that privilege majority rule, consensus and top-down decision-making. No less than Joanna Macy endorses the book, speaking of ‘...Miki’s brilliance and vast experience, steer[ing] us away from wasting time and accelerat[ing] our work for the Great Turning’; family law attorney Michael Dittberner states that ‘This model should be followed by Congress and state legislatures’; while Director of the Institute for Healing Justice Education, Victor Lee Lewis, writes of Miki’s ‘deep scholarly rigor and poetic artfulness’ – words which exactly match my own experience.

Kashtan surely speaks to the experience of many of us when she starkly articulates the (sometimes toxic) dialectic that manifests between *efficiency* and *collaboration* in group functioning; as she writes in her Preface:

Many efficiency-oriented organizations merely give lip service to collaboration because the only ways they know to collaborate are unsustainably inefficient. As a result they lose the energy and talents unleashed by true collaboration. By contrast, many alternative groups and organizations are so committed to collaboration they are willing to sacrifice efficiency, to the point of driving away innumerable people who resonate with their ideals and vision and cannot stand the endless process.

So *The Highest Common Denominator* is dedicated to outlining tried-and-tested ways in which both efficiency and collaboration can be honoured together, and neither sacrificed for the sake of the other. In this sense, this book will be essential reading for group workers from a very wide range of settings, practices and orientations. Kashtan’s stated aim is ‘to share as much of the methodology – its breakthrough insights, principles, and practices – as can be done in writing, to accelerate the pace at which individuals can learn this method and put it to use’ (p. 14). Yet with characteristic modesty, she is also clear that ‘I have no illusion that Convergent Facilitation is the only method that can achieve effective group facilitation and outcomes’.

Following an introduction (‘Why Convergent Facilitation?’), the book comprises seven chapters of varying lengths. A first chapter on facilitation and group function poses the question, ‘Why do some groups work well together and others don’t? And what does facilitation have to do with that?’ (p. 31). Here we find a fascinating description of Kashtan’s development as a group facilitator, with her learnings on the way outlined and illuminatingly reflected upon – including her learning about group process from the Occupy movement (pp. 37–8). For Kashtan,

Occupy didn’t sustain itself, in part, because of how extraordinarily difficult it was to make decisions and move forward given the degree of mistrust of leadership and power the movement exhibited, even to the point of opposition to facilitation and dialogue. (p. 38)

There is also an interesting discussion of the ‘commons’ phenomenon, with the view expressed that groups managing commons and similar such groups

are able to do this because they are not debating opinions or having a discussion. They are making decisions about practical matters that vitally affect all of them, and they are autonomous in terms of carrying out those decisions rather than depending on some external authority such as government or a corporation. (pp. 39–40)

This is followed by a key chapter on ‘The Gift of Self: The Art of Transparent Facilitation’ (22 pages) that will be of especial interest to humanistic practitioners of all hues. As Kashtan writes, ‘In my experience, transparency while facilitating has the enormous potential to contribute to a group’s ability to open up, to come together, and to function with trust and efficiency’ (p. 44). Further, she points out that she has witnessed ‘far less transparency in group facilitation than I advocate for... – because our cultural habits suggest that a facilitator is supposed to be “neutral”.... I think that as facilitators we lose effectiveness when we hide important facets of our inner process’ (p. 45). For Kashtan, then, ‘Responsible transparency requires both a high level of self-awareness and internal mastery, as well as finely tuned communication skills to convey to the group what we choose to share of our inner experience while sustaining the focus on participants’ needs’ (p. 45). I return to this key chapter later.

A survey of the procedures available in the CF approach is followed in Chapter 4 with an exploration of facilitation principles that enable efficient collaboration (28 pages). Here, Kashtan introduces ‘a number of themes that show up in most facilitation scenarios, and provides guidance for inner work as well as specific skills needed to navigate the complexities that arise’ (p. 32). The core principles that support reaching collaborative decisions are worked with, aiming to transcend the implicit dichotomy pitting collaboration and

efficiency against each other. Not least, the principle that *everyone matters* is introduced, and key distinctions are made between willingness and *preference*, on the one hand, and willingness and *compromise* on the other.

Then, in what is the heart of the book, Chapter 5 looks at the breakthrough process (amounting to almost 90 pages), providing the specific structure and flow Kashtan has developed to reach decisions, and with a full description of the Convergent Facilitation approach to decision-making. The specific methodology that supports groups in converging on a decision with which they can all willingly move forward is presented.

Chapter 6 then spends nearly 40 pages exploring the central question of power differences – an issue that humanistic facilitators typically foreground in their ways of working – looking, for example, at power within the group, and between the facilitator and the group. In all these instances, the aim is to use one’s skills ‘to establish true collaboration even when power differences abound’ (p. 34).

The main text ends with Chapter 7 and an illustrative case study looking at contested child custody legislation – ‘the most dramatic example of such a breakthrough that I have facilitated’ (p. 19), comprising Minnesota legislators, lobbyists, lawyers, advocacy groups, judges, and child-development experts. Here, it is demonstrated that ‘collaborative lawmaking is entirely possible, even under conditions of strong ideological polarization’, and it is shown ‘how and why the principles work to create such breakthrough results’ (p. 35).

Finally, an appendix usefully presents a detailed outline describing the basic flow of facilitated meetings.

Convergent Facilitation is a three-phase process, briefly summarised by Kashtan as follows (see pp. 26–30):

Phase 1: Criteria Gathering

What is important to everyone in the group? What's said is converted by the facilitator and participants into the 'non-controversial essence', with speakers recognising the essence of what's important to them having been captured, that is at the same time non-controversial for others in the group (p. 27).

Phase 2: Proposal Creation

Does anyone have a way forward that addresses all the criteria (needs) on the list? This entails coming up with one or more proposals that attend to the list of non-controversial criteria imported from Phase 1 (p. 28).

Phase 3: Decision Making

Can the group come to a decision that everybody can accept as their own? The purpose is to convert one of the proposals to a decision, or find some other combination of strategies that will amount to a decision. The process is complete when everyone in the group is wholeheartedly willing to accept the decision as their own (p. 29).

Outliers

What gifts do these persons bring to the group?

For Kashtan, the most important variables in group functioning are the quality of the process; clarity of shared purpose; and autonomy and meaningful capacity to carry out decisions (p. 40). In this review I want to focus in particular on Kashtan's detailed and rich discussion of *transparency* (and by implication, self-disclosure), a discussion which is discerningly nuanced and of great relevance to humanistic groupworkers, in what she terms the 'challenges' and the 'trap' of transparency (pp. 46–8).

It seems unpredictable, she writes, 'when transparency could sometimes lead to increased trust, safety, and connection, and sometimes to

the loss of trust' – which unpredictability she sees as one of the reasons why so many group facilitators opt for caution, and even restraint, when it comes to self-disclosure. Kashtan is certainly not afraid to call out what we might term a 'bogus neutrality' cover story – with facilitators making what *appear* to be neutral and objective statements which in fact include and smuggle in 'hidden expressions of self'. Sometimes, facilitators express their own impressions and evaluations *as if* they are simple observations; yet 'Any time we do that, we consciously or unconsciously disguise the fact that we are expressing our own subjective perceptions and experience' (p. 47). Perhaps facilitators worth their salt are indeed "doomed" to learn to be transparent if we want to act with integrity in our role as facilitators'; and in this spirit, Kashtan explicitly embraces 'multi-partiality' or 'omnipartiality', which is importantly distinct from *impartiality*. She regularly tell groups that she is *not* neutral, and doesn't intend to be so: 'My goal', she writes, is to make things work out for everyone, and I advocate for everyone. I care, and I pour my heart and soul into any facilitation task.' (pp. 47–8)

In sum, then, 'transparent facilitation requires a high degree of awareness of our inner experience, a level of self-connection, or conscious awareness of our feelings and needs (p. 49), where 'Before risking self-disclosure, it is essential to consider elements such as the group's purpose and the capacity of the group to contain the experience of a facilitator without getting lost or anxious' (p. 48). And Kashtan further maintains that the facilitator needs clarity about what she is wanting to achieve, or create, in revealing an aspect of oneself to a group:

The more rigorously we examine our motivation in speaking, the more likely we are to support the group process rather than hinder it. If we have not clearly identified the purpose of sharing a part of ourselves, we run the risk of *acting* on our needs without awareness. (p. 49, her italics)

Facilitators certainly ‘...cannot rest with a casual choice, because in the absence of clarity of purpose, participants may interpret unconscious needs in us *even if those needs are not there*’ (ibid., my italics). This is clearly a settled yet non-dogmatic view on self-disclosure and transparency that has been arrived at through wide-ranging experience, aided by Kashtan’s characteristically acute analytical abilities to make sense of complexity, and to drill down as deeply as needed in order to make coherent-enough sense of that complexity.

In what she calls ‘Holding the whole while sharing’ (pp. 51–2), we read further that

The fundamental stance of facilitating is one of split awareness of self and of the group... [continually tracking] what is happening inside me and [being] attentive to the needs of participants and the dynamics of the group as a whole at the same time. Once I have identified a purpose for transparency, I then aim to determine my capacity to stay on both of these levels at once even while being transparent.

The chapter ends with a detailed description of three essential transparency skills – namely: Ending expressions with a clear request to the group; Owning any feedback we give to the group; and Fluidity in switching between transparency and empathic reflection of others – all being drawn from the legacy of Marshall Rosenberg’s work in codifying aspects of Nonviolent Communication. It is important to mention Rosenberg at this point, for as Kashtan says in her acknowledgements with characteristic modesty,

None of this book... would have ever come into being without meeting, and then learning from Marshall Rosenberg.... [E]verything I know is informed by the books I read, events I attended, and conversations I had with him. The image of standing on the shoulders of giants seems apt here. (p. 305)

All in all, for me this transparency chapter alone is a goldmine of wisdom and insight that every

humanistic worker would greatly benefit from reading.

The book is replete with vivid case studies and practical examples, and the admirable openness and transparency that is a core aspect of the Convergent Facilitation approach is faithfully mirrored in the way the book itself is written. I was also struck by Kashtan’s characteristic modesty and generosity in fully acknowledging the sources from which she gained crucial insights on her developmental journey.

My final point is about method and the character of the facilitator – and is one that Kashtan might not agree with, as she writes,

If [the approach’s results] sound like incredible magic, extraordinary luck, *or exceptional talent*, I see it differently. I have trained many people in this methodology, including people who didn’t necessarily imagine they could achieve spectacular results, who then went on to have their own amazing successes’. (p. 19, my italics)

Now I’m not wanting to suggest in any way that Kashtan’s methods as outlined in this book are not a key ingredient of highly effective groupwork. But perhaps *on their own*, procedural technique and method might not be enough; for surely the *being of the facilitator* is also a key variable in the field. To be mischievous for a moment, it’s not inconceivable that Miki Kashtan could achieve excellent facilitator outcomes using a range of different methods simply by virtue of the person she is; and equally, her method being ‘delivered’ in the hands of someone who didn’t possess her exceptional qualities might not be nearly as successful. Not that there isn’t a mutual co-constitutive relationship between character and method also! – so perhaps in seeking out effective group facilitation, both the method *and* the ‘personhood’ of the facilitator matter.

One of the book’s endorsers, co-founder of the Oakland Cantic Farm Anne Symens-Bucher, writes that ‘this book can change the world’;

and I'm convinced that Anne is right. The book is an outstanding complement to the Humanistic Psychology and groupwork literatures: it deserves the widest possible readership, and the CF approach the highest public profile that is achievable. If, finally, you would like to support Miki Kashtan's projects and her vision for a non-violent, compassionate and loving society, and enable her goal of moving more of her work into a gift-economy offering, you can donate to her Circle of Support, or contact her through the editor. And of course you can delight in reading her regular column for this journal!

Note

1 The ebook and/or print copy can be ordered on Miki's website, thefearlessheart.org, choosing the 'Store' drop-down menu. Link to buy print or ebook: <https://tinyurl.com/hpkujr4>. On the *Fearless Heart* website, a PDF of the book can be downloaded, with a contribution on a gift-economy basis; link: <https://thefearlessheart.org/item/pdf-hcd/>.

Richard House edits *Self & Society* and its online magazine.

SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

“Leadership does not depend on being right.”

Ivan Illich, 1926–2002