

Teams for a new generation: A facilitator's field guide.

Reviewed by Roger Greenaway

Reviewing Skills Training, Scotland

Robinson, G, & Rose, M. (2007). Teams for a new generation: A facilitator's field guide:
Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse.

164 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4343-2411-5

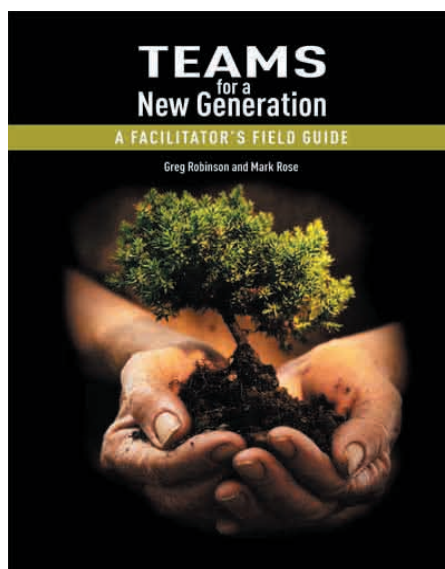
The blurb reads: "This book provides a simple model to understand how teams move past the mediocrity of consensus to innovative thinking that comes with Collective Learning. The purpose is to help facilitators move experiential learning beyond the traditional notion of teambuilding."

The first half of the book comprises ten chapters that are mostly about collective learning and awareness (relational, personal and organisational). The second half of the book describes 12 'tools' and 13 'activities.' The 'tools' are a mixture of models and worksheets. Greg Robinson declares that one of his favourite 'tools' is a Challenge Course, though more logically the Challenge Course Climbing Tower is classified as an 'activity' rather than as a 'tool.' Collectively, these tools could be described as 'diagnostic tools' because their stated purpose is "to help the facilitator assess, track and pinpoint habits and tendencies that may be limiting the team's effectiveness." These tools are for developing the 'Meta-skills' of 'Emotional Maturity' (comprising emotional awareness and courage) and 'Critical Thinking' (comprising critical reflection and systems thinking). It is interesting that the tools are intended to help the facilitator notice behaviours that may be *limiting* the team's effectiveness. A facilitator of team learning will surely also want tools that help them notice behaviours that are *contributing* to team effectiveness (not just limiting behaviours), as well as tools for *teams* to use (not just tools for the facilitator), as well as tools that get *beneath* behaviours. The authors actually do get beneath behaviours in their discussion of Argyris' Ladder of Inference and in their Emotional Chains model

Review Summary

A favourite question of the authors takes the form "Why of all possible behaviours did you choose this one?" So it seems fair to ask (especially in a book review) "Why of all possible books about facilitation choose this one?" It is difficult to recommend the book as a whole because the theory and the practice do not fit together. The authors seem unaware of these

mismatches. I felt inspired by some of the introductory insights, and was then disappointed to find that the practical exercises did not match. For example, there is an early emphasis on the value of collective learning but there is sparse guidance about facilitation processes that turn experience into learning (even the tool called 'Guided Learning Conversations' is more about developing awareness than it is about having a learning conversation). More seriously, their convincing criticism of behavioural approaches at the outset is followed by favourable descriptions of just such exercises. Because of the internal



inconsistencies, it seems more useful to review this book as if it is an edited collection rather than as an integrated work – especially as there are some standalone sections that would be of value to team facilitators.

Whose traditional ways?

Greg Robinson describes a transformation in his own approach to facilitation, but it is written in a way that assumes that other facilitators are stuck in the old traditional way and that this book is breaking new ground. In order to convince this reader about his wider claims, I would want to see a clear definition of 'the traditional way,' together with some pointers about where it exists. Whose theories or practices exemplify this traditional way? I would expect a book with 'new generation' in the title to be more specific

about whose traditional ways (and which traditional ways) are being pushed aside by this 'new generation' approach.

New generation?

A book that provides tools to "assess, track and pinpoint habits and tendencies that may be limiting the team's effectiveness" is clearly focused on negatives. This may be 'new generation' compared to some traditional ways, but when I think 'new generation' in experiential learning and team facilitation I especially think of the creative ways in which people are combining appreciative inquiry and solution focused thinking with experiential learning (Ricketts and Willis, 2001; Torres, 2001). I am not suggesting that there is only one direction for 'new generation' thinking but I find nothing very new or refreshing in this book and the tone is often pessimistic. The authors state that "The burden of self-discovery is too heavy to bear alone" (p. 7). Who says self-discovery is a burden? Surely self-discovery frees a person from the burden of ignorance and opens up new possibilities for further discovery? This doesn't feel 'new generation.'

Carelessness

The authors' obvious concerns about avoiding sexism in their note to the reader on page ix are not followed through with their naming of the reflection 'activity' as 'Man in the Mirror.' This carelessness is also found in phrases such as 'new innovation' and 'the key lesson out of this lesson' (p. 132) which even without the repetition seems a little out of place in a book about collective learning from experience – surely a long way from 'lessons'? I am not convinced by the authors' claim that learning is intentional and change is not (p. 11) because I can instantly think of counter examples of intentional change and unintentional learning – especially as this formed the core of my own doctoral thesis. They give advice about changing self rather than seeking to change other people, but then follow this advice with an exercise that asks, "If you could make one recommendation on an area that this person could develop that would make them more effective, what would you recommend?" (p. 89). Their 'Basic Reflection Model' (p. 55) is mistakenly attributed to Outward Bound and misses out its originator's advice to cycle twice through the questions 'What? So What? Now What?' - first rigorously and then in a more relaxed way (Borton, 1970, p. 89).

Wide margins do not make it a field guide

From the title I would expect a 'facilitator's field guide' to help the reader identify what is going on in a team and to provide some guidance on how to help the team grow and develop into a 'new generation' team. It scores fairly well on both counts, but it would score higher as a manual for programme design

rather than as a guide for using 'in the field.' We are told that the wide margins are for making notes 'in the field' so the choice of the term 'field guide' was clearly taken seriously. But the wide margins, wide line spacing, large type face and large page size inflate the overall size of the book giving it the look and feel of a thesis. The absence of an index is a serious flaw in any reference book and especially in a field guide. The contents page lists the chapters but does not list the tools and activities comprising the second half of the book. If you want to use this book as a guide you will need to create your own index by placing bookmarks on pages 81 and 123 where the practical items are listed. You will then need to add page numbers to these lists, together with a little explanatory note beside each tool or activity so that you can readily see its purpose. You may also want to create an index of the models in the first half of the book. These oversights by the publisher Authorhouse® make this the most navigationally challenging field guide you are ever likely to encounter.

References

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- Torres, C. (2001). *The appreciative facilitator*. Maryville, TN: Mobile Team Challenge.

About the reviewer

Dr Roger Greenaway provides training and consultancy internationally on debriefing and facilitation skills. His articles, research findings and book reviews are at <http://reviewing.co.uk>. He may be contacted at: Reviewing Skills Training, 9 Drummond Place Lane, Stirling, Scotland FK8 2JF. Or email: roger@reviewing.co.uk