

"HARNESSING THE POWER OF COLLABORATIVE BREAKTHROUGHS"

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There are literally mountains of books and articles which have been written on the topic of how to hold better meetings. Frequently, the advice given merely reiterates the same basic tenets: have an agenda, clarify purpose and objectives at the start, set and observe time limits, establish ground rules, keep the discussion on track, document action items (specifying the who-what-when), and follow-up. Slightly more elaborate lists exhort us to have win-win attitudes, be an active listener, show respect for fellow participants, and avoid distracting "side-bar" conversations (i.e., those one-on-one or a little subgroup murmurings). At the far end of the scale are the recipes for creating an atmosphere of dialogue. Here it is important to give others our most reverent attention as they speak, to lay bare our private assumptions, and to go wherever the conversational flow takes us.

Underlying the many espoused models of meeting effectiveness are fundamental differences of opinion as to what a "good" or "ideal" meeting would actually look like to the proverbial fly on the wall. Disagreement exists, for example, as to whether participants should be allowed to "talk over" each other, particularly if the pace is fast and excitement levels are high. A further disagreement exists as to whether participant should be allowed to "get on a soapbox" to advocate his or her position. Some even suggest that participants should be allowed to change the subject whenever they please. And finally, there is a debate about what constitutes the best measure of effectiveness for meetings -- Is it efficiency in completing an agenda, maintenance of order, or problem-solving impact? While these might be interesting questions to some, such arguments miss the whole point of which set of meeting behaviors best support collaborative breakthroughs. The following is our view of the conditions and process for actually making such breakthroughs happen.

WHEN IS A REAL BREAKTHROUGH ACTUALLY REQUIRED?

Meeting effectiveness, or more specifically the lack of it, is a good barometer of when a real breakthrough might be needed. If meetings on a vitally important topic repeatedly turn unproductive, simply persevering with more of the same efforts is unlikely to produce any better results. Three situations, in particular, signal that a real breakthrough could be required:

- A critical issue persists in spite of your repeated, best efforts to resolve it.
- A troublesome situation is deteriorating into an out-of-control "mess".
- Implementation of a new vision remains little more than a blank sheet of paper.

For a breakthrough to occur in any of these situations, it is essential to first acknowledge that the underlying problem may have progressed beyond the stock of usual approaches -- including deferring to conventional project management. Consequently, any group assembled to collaborate on its solutions must be given freedom and encouragement to "think differently" about the issues involved; or as they say, "outside of the box."

WHY NOT JUST HOLD A BRAINSTORMING SESSION?

Without a doubt, a lively brainstorming session can be useful in constructing a broad list of possibilities for further screening, including those which might otherwise be easily dismissed or even considered too "nutty" to raise. The problem with brainstorming is that groups often resort to this technique before completing the "heavy lifting" required to surface the truly pivotal issue they must address. As a consequence, brainstorming sessions often end up with a laundry list of possible solutions to a myriad of different problems. Lacking focus and genuine emotional investment in the possibilities raised, group members quickly find some other cause to capture their attention. Ultimately, they may even blame one another for failing to follow through!

Breakthroughs can arise under a variety of different circumstances, including some sparked by an off-hand remark made during an otherwise casual discussion. In reality, however, breakthroughs seldom if ever occur by consciously applying the same processes used in ordinary meetings. Why is that? Shouldn't a focused discussion process be able to eventually grind out a breakthrough?

The problem with ordinary discussions is that participants tend to take the path of least resistance, often driven by unseen social and political forces operating within the group. An immediate evaluation follows every suggestion. Contributions of more powerful participants are often given instant credibility. Those of lower ranking participants are more likely to be viewed with suspicion. Temporary coalitions of support are formed, often based on factors existing outside the meeting room. Listening, thinking and speaking begin to overlap. Ultimately, participants may be inclined to accept the first solution that ruffles the fewest feathers.

Real breakthroughs, on the other hand, often involve a longer and more difficult journey. Behaviors and attitudes must be learned which may feel quite uncomfortable and counter-intuitive to all but the most experienced groups. Participants must learn what it actually means to listen to each other's words without rushing to judgment. That is to say, they must learn to "hold fire"; pausing to allow "soak time" before responding. They must also learn to avoid the common device of mentally "togglng" between listening, thinking and replaying previous comments. Finally, they must learn that resistance or frustration can sometimes be a sign of impending progress rather than futility.

IS A SPECIALIZED FACILITATOR NEEDED?

For groups lacking experience in making breakthroughs happen in a collaborative setting, a competent breakthrough facilitator can be extremely useful. Certainly, collaborative breakthroughs can and do occur without a facilitator. However, even groups that have frequently worked together in ordinary meetings — such as staff meetings or routine inter-departmental meetings — are likely to be at a disadvantage when it comes to seeking a genuine breakthrough. The very behaviors and implicit rules which contribute to the efficient disposition of agenda items in an ordinary meeting tend to ensure that unexpected breakthroughs will **not** occur. Too often, the path taken by groups working on their own is to seek "consensus" — which can mean just "wearing each other down" until the least offensive alternative seems

better than nothing. Even the use of conventional facilitators — those whose primary focus is "meeting effectiveness" (i.e., staying on agenda and recording comments) — will not provide a systematic means for delivering collaborative breakthroughs.

The search for a breakthrough is fundamentally a search for previously unseen alternatives. Consequently, the natural instincts of a group of collaborators may alone be insufficient to make that happen. Anything which adds to a group's awareness of broader, but relevant issues or alternatives can be a contribution. Consequently, an experienced and well-prepared breakthrough facilitator can stimulate productive thinking by raising provocative content-oriented questions and/or alternatives. The critical prerequisite is that a good breakthrough facilitator must be able to introduce content items for the group to explore without personally assuming allegiance to any particular outcome. This requires a delicate balance between process and content focus — a learned skill requiring considerable experience, discipline and maturity.

WHAT DOES "BREAKTHROUGH" MEAN IN THE CONTEXT USED HERE?

In creating a definition of "breakthrough" useful for our purposes, we started with a commonly accepted dictionary definition, but then modified it to incorporate the subtler aspects of the actual experience. If you're interested, we'll take you through the thought process on how we developed that definition. Otherwise, feel free to go to the answer at the end of this section.

Start with the definition of "breakthrough" as it appears in the Random House Dictionary, 2nd Edition Unabridged:

"...any significant or sudden advance, development, achievement, or increase; as in scientific knowledge or diplomacy, that removes a barrier to progress."

In the simplest language, then, this notion of "breakthrough" occurs when we get "stuck" and then somehow manage to get "unstuck." Unfortunately, the concept of "stuck-unstuck" can also be applied to situations which represent a sudden, but otherwise insignificant event. For example, when we stare at a crossword puzzle clue, and then — seemingly out of the blue — the right word suddenly pops into our head. Significance is always a vital requirement of a meaningful breakthrough. Consequently, a real "breakthrough" not only removes a barrier to progress, but it will always be a sudden and significant event.

A second definition of "breakthrough" from the same source adds another possible perspective:

"...an act or instance of removing or surpassing an obstruction or restriction; the overcoming of a stalemate."

This definition would suggest that a **barrier** of some kind exists before our sudden and significant event occurs. If lightning were to strike a barn and set it on fire, that event would most certainly qualify as both sudden and significant — at least if it were your barn. However, no barrier existed before the event. While we might deem such an event a calamity, it would hardly constitute a breakthrough. Notice, too, that the "barrier to progress" may have blossomed into a full blown stalemate.

From the same Random House Dictionary, a "stalemate" is defined as:

"...any position or situation in which no action can be taken or progress made; i.e., deadlock."

However, in any real breakthrough we do, by definition, ultimately overcome the obstacle. Therefore, it must only feel like a stalemate. That is, prior to a breakthrough we are somehow left feeling as if no further progress can be made.

Putting these clarifications together, we can now offer our definition of a breakthrough:

"The sudden and significant overcoming of a barrier beyond which no further progress was previously felt to be possible."

WHAT IS A COLLABORATIVE BREAKTHROUGH?

A collaborative breakthrough is obviously something that occurs when individuals "team up" to create a breakthrough. However, as a definition, this would overlook much of the complexity and subtlety of the subject. In order to create a more useful and meaningful definition of "collaborative breakthrough," we need to backtrack and look at the terms separately. Again, if you're interested, we'll take you through a short thought process on how we got to our definition. If not, please feel free to go to our final working definition at the end of this section.

First consider the concept of "collaborate." Again, from the Random House Dictionary, 2nd Edition Unabridged, the term "collaborate" can be defined as:

"...to work, one with another; to *cooperate*, as on a literary work."

Turning to the term "cooperate," we find two useful definitions:

"...to work or act together or jointly for a common purpose or benefit."

"...to work or act with another or other persons willingly and agreeably."

Collaboration, therefore, involves working with others in some joint pursuit of a common goal. Moreover, the participants are freely committing their attention and efforts toward that shared goal. While the activities of a professional sports team might fulfill all of the requirements suggested for collaboration, we are more interested in the mental cooperation likely to be associated with breakthroughs. This would lead us toward refining our definition of collaboration to include "thinking with others" or "pooling one's thinking with that of others" in the joint pursuit of some common goal.

Putting this together, we can now propose a more powerful definition of "collaborative breakthrough," one fully consistent with the experiences on which the **Brilliant Meetings Process**® is based:

"When a group of individuals pools its attention and best thinking in pursuit of a common goal, only to find themselves thoroughly *confounded* by a barrier beyond which no further progress seems possible -- then a "collaborative breakthrough" can be said to have occurred if and when that group suddenly discovers a powerful, unexpected solution for overcoming that barrier."

Understandably, this definition might seem unnecessarily wordy to some. However, as we'll discuss in the next section, it is only by recognizing the importance of the "confounding barrier" that we are able to craft strategies for *systematically* achieving collaborative breakthroughs.

WHAT MUST HAPPEN BEFORE A COLLABORATIVE BREAKTHROUGH CAN OCCUR?

Preceding a collaborative breakthrough, participants will have individually and collectively exhausted their list of obvious and readily available solutions. In simple terms, they will have "talked themselves out," and yet — for some compelling reason — they remain unwilling to settle on compromise or "consensus-of-the-majority" solutions. Inevitably, the group's early excitement and confidence will begin to erode — leaving its members feeling increasingly perplexed, discouraged or, perhaps, even withdrawn. While such feelings can be distinctly uncomfortable, this state of affairs is often the precursor to a breakthrough. It demonstrates that the group has completed its important prerequisite work.

Any group pursuing a real breakthrough must, therefore, expend its energy wisely. Most importantly, this means avoiding the counter-productive clashes which result when ideas are accompanied by "over-selling" and challenges by "over-killing." Moreover, the form this discussion takes determines whether group members will be able to fully coordinate their attack on the barriers ahead. A "shoot from the hip" discussion is more apt than not to damage the interpersonal support system which must be put in place.

In order to overcome the period of anxiety which inevitably precedes an important breakthrough, a high level of trust and mutual respect must be built up and reinforced between all participants. In all but the most experienced groups of collaborators, such trust and respect are exceptionally fragile; that is to say, easily destroyed by even one wrong word from an insensitive participant. Suffice it to say, for a group to negotiate this treacherous path, the assistance of a skilled breakthrough facilitator can be quite useful.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING THE MOMENTS WHEN A BREAKTHROUGH OCCURS?

The following is a theoretical framework we have developed to make sense of the complex processes repeatedly observed in the crucial, final stages of a breakthrough. Some readers, quite understandably, might not be interested in exploring the subject to this depth. Suffice it to say, we believe that breakthroughs, while seeming to come out of nowhere, are the logical consequence of an illogical state of mind. And if that curious statement does not intrigue you, please skip to the next question.

In using the **Brilliant Meetings Process**[®], we have repeatedly seen three stages occurring in the final moments when the breakthrough idea is actually created:

1. Typically, either something happens in the meeting or something is said by one person which "triggers" the resulting breakthrough process. Ironically, the person most directly responsible for this event or utterance often does not realize its significance at that moment.
2. There is then a sudden "flash of recognition", often by a second person, of a potentially powerful new insight attached to this triggering event.

3. Finally, someone in the group, perhaps a third person, suggests a simple yet elegant way to express the logic and essence of the breakthrough idea in words which can persuade others to "buy-in"

In a later section, we'll talk more about how a group comes to know that it has in fact experienced a breakthrough. For now, suffice it to say that the actual breakthrough is the sudden emergence of a stunning idea around which powerful changes can be built in the future. Now let's take a closer look at each of the three stages seen in those few, critical moments when a breakthrough actually "hatches". We caption these respectively as the Triggering Incident, Flash of Recognition and Final Articulation.

Triggering Incident

Initially, the triggering incident will almost invariably seem to be of no particular significance. After all, one group member is probably merely reiterating or modestly elaborating on certain aspects of the same discussion which led to the current impasse. The triggering incident may then cause someone else to belatedly ask "What did you just say?" or to say "Please, say that again." At this moment, the seeds of a breakthrough have just been sown. This sudden appeal to "Wait-a-minute!" is driven by a vague awareness that something just doesn't seem quite right. That is to say, we become aware that among the assumptions, patterns and conclusions built up in our minds there lurks a potentially serious discontinuity.

Flash of Recognition

Underlying the flash recognition stage is a sudden change of perspective, stemming from two possible sources. On one hand, this change can be driven by the sudden awareness of the existence of a crucial bit of non-conforming information which we term a "**disconnect**". On the other hand, the change of perspective can be driven by the unexpected validation of a hypothetical or "What if...?" proposition which merges disparate pieces of information in what we can term a "**synthesis**". Figuratively speaking, what happens during the flash-recognition stage is something akin to "ripping apart" or "snapping together," but occurring in the fabric of our mental processes. That still begs the question "Where does the impetus for this sudden and improbable change of state originate?" To answer that question, we need to examine this specific phenomenon more closely.

A flash of recognition of the disconnect variety arises when confidence in the logic of our thinking is suddenly undermined by new information. However, real breakthroughs seldom occur at the instant incompatible facts are first heard. It is as if we store numerous contradictory ideas in the recesses of our mind. That is easily understandable when you consider the vast amount of information that bombards us daily. Unraveling illogical assumptions is a time-consuming process. Consequently, many facts and assumptions are apparently accumulated on an "as-is" basis. Only when we clearly realize that our thinking contains significant contradictions does the flash recognition of a disconnect ("rip") occur.

A flash recognition of the synthesis variety occurs in exactly the opposite fashion; that is, through a sudden awareness of the "merge-ability" of previously contradictory elements. First we are caught on the horns of a dilemma, seeing no logical way to escape it. To unlock such a dilemma, we must first be willing to "play" with information. That is say, we must dare to scan

for odd and unusual possibilities; including those which might at first seem dumb, silly or even preposterous. If we are finally able to see our the situation from an entirely new angle, our contradictions suddenly disappear ("snap together") in the flash recognition of a breakthrough.

Final Articulation

In the final stage of the breakthrough process there is a "carving-out" of a more elegant, final articulation of the breakthrough idea. This initially involves the trial-and-error construction and testing of various alternative representations of the breakthrough idea, each offered as tentative statement. During this crucial stage, it is important that the articulation process be allowed to gain some traction before more rigorous testing and criticism is applied. The key is to give the "idea contributor" a full hearing, listening carefully for any opportunities to build onto it. Serious reservations and outright challenges must be temporarily held in abeyance. Once the idea has been articulated to the point where its originators can pause to take a breath, neutral (i.e., non-judgmental) questions of clarification can be asked. Finally, well-formed challenges can be gradually introduced to test the robustness of the idea.

Having examined the three principal elements of the breakthrough process, you might ask whether all three could be solely attributable to contributions of a single individual — someone who just happened to be operating in the midst of a group. If that were the case, would we still want to call it a collaborative breakthrough? The answer is probably "yes," simply because it is hard to imagine a breakthrough occurring in a group setting that has not been materially influenced by every participant to the process. The barrier preceding the breakthrough is itself, almost by definition, always the product of spirited interactions among all those involved. Moreover, group members have undoubtedly functioned as a sounding board, allowing even the most self-sufficient of individuals to receive encouragement and validation as their breakthrough idea emerges. Consequently, the credit for authorship of a breakthrough emerging in a group setting legitimately belongs to the whole group.

HOW WELL DO GROUP MEMBERS NEED TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER?

From our experience, truly effective collaboration can only take place after three elements have had time to develop:

First, group members must have worked together in productive collaboration long enough for a uniquely robust level of trust to have developed between each of them. Each member must feel that he or she is no longer at risk of being singled out and humiliated for saying something wrong-minded or naïve. There must be trust that each person is trying to say exactly what they mean without guile, deceit or hidden aspirations. And most importantly, each participant must trust that his or her efforts to contribute will be met with attentive listening, followed shortly thereafter by a thoughtful, open-minded response.

Second, group members must have had sufficient time together to develop a deep respect for one another's potential to make a positive contribution. Each member must find some basis on which a sense of respect for each of the other participants can be built. There must also develop a presumption of value to be gleaned from every contribution, no matter how vague or weak it might first seem. That can occur only after a perception of consistency, integrity and earnestness attributable to each participant has developed.

Third, members of a group must develop an innate sense of how their behaviors can support dialogue and reward commitment; and they must learn how to avoid those behaviors which only encourage competition and guardedness. Again, these skills take time to develop.

The attitudes and capabilities described above are exceptionally subtle and, thus, unlikely to be found in a group inexperienced in successfully dealing with the challenges of collaborative breakthroughs. Each takes considerable time to develop. How long this process will actually take depends in no small measure on the mix of personality temperaments and competitive instincts resident within the group.

WHAT CAN GROUPS DO TO BEST PREPARE FOR MAKING A BREAKTHROUGH?

As previously discussed, collaborative breakthroughs emerge from the pooled thinking of group members. Consequently, we need to encourage behaviors which add to pooled thinking and avoid those which detract or add nothing. Unfortunately, meetings can often become intellectual wrestling matches cloaked in a veneer of tact and diplomacy. To one degree or another, many participants are seen to be vying for control of the meeting's outcome or, at the very least, attempting to steer it in a direction favorable to their own interests. While participants may "score points" in such meetings, little is added to pooled thinking. To successfully collaborate for breakthroughs, group members must first learn to hold in check their instinctive rush to judgment.

If breakthroughs happen only after a group has become stymied by a seemingly insurmountable barrier, then we should be asking *"What behaviors would most likely lead a group efficiently toward the point where it finds itself confronting such a barrier?"* And, of course, we would want to specify that those behaviors must not injure relations among group members or jeopardize the cooperation essential for breakthroughs. So, let's reverse engineer the conditions leading to a group becoming "stumped" in this manner.

Conditions Immediately Preceding Breakthroughs

We can speculate from a purely logical point of view that the following conditions would have existed immediately prior to reaching a seemingly critical impasse:

1. The group must believe that they are finally working on the one pivotal issue remaining in addressing their challenge (otherwise they might simply move the discussion to another issue).
2. This in turn implies that the group will have gone through some process to convince themselves that other issues have either been effectively resolved; or alternatively, that other issues are subordinate, immaterial or deferrable compared to the pivotal one.
3. The group will have enumerated and ranked all of the issues from their perspective or, at least, have agreed on a model of the problem which puts this one issue squarely in the pivotal position.
4. The group will have also exhausted their list of potential solutions, having evaluated each possibility and rendered it invalid, unworkable or unacceptable.

5. In order to conclude that they have totally "run out of ideas," the members of the group will most likely be intellectually and emotionally drained. Even the last "hiccup" of a suggestion will have been politely disproved.
6. Having "fought the good fight and lost," there will be a strong sense of all being in the same predicament, being on the same team, and therefore being equals at that moment. Such sentiments give rise to a strong sense of affiliation and mutual respect.
7. The frustration of feeling to have collectively failed in their efforts must give way to a deep, shared sense of disappointment and resignation. Therefore, it will at that point be OK to reveal one's emotions.
8. Competition will have long since given way to earnest cooperation. All of the initial optimism, enthusiasm and energy of group members will have been thoroughly depleted.
9. Group members will have long since stopped disparaging one another's motives, and started listening to one another with great intensity of attention.

The landscape where collaborative breakthroughs best occur is poised on the narrow path between dialogue and discussion. Unlike dialogue, such collaborations can never be free of ambitions. And unlike most discussions, the conversation can not be steered solely by argument or emotion toward a favored conclusion.

WHO ULTIMATELY DECIDES THAT A BREAKTHROUGH HAS OCCURRED?

To most people, the obvious answer would seem to be that a breakthrough has occurred "if and only if the person with the power and authority to act on it finally agrees." However, that simplification ignores the opportunity for building support at all levels through a more iterative and step-wise process. In major organizational alignment projects, for example, we often plan for up to ten distinct iterations over the course of a project. Admittedly, that requires being willing to initially put forward some very sketchy ideas for early feedback.

It is important to note that the breakthrough idea is itself evolving throughout the process of convincing others of its merit. For that reason, we speak of the ultimate validation of a breakthrough idea as being "buy-in". Such buy-in can be built up through successive cycles of "designing and selling" conducted at multiple levels in an organization. At each such exchange, the idea is presented, and then questions or challenges are answered as honestly as possible with the logic and information available at that point. With additional "designing" iterations ("bites of the apple") available, potential breakthrough ideas can always be modified to accommodate feedback on issues not previously anticipated. But equally important, we also want to specifically identify those aspects of a proposed idea which are agreed to have merit. Thus, we are continually adding to the foundation on which to further develop the idea and a plan for its implementation. Said another way, we want to always be building a way forward, rather than simply running up against the same wall over and over again. And with each cycle of testing and improvement, the idea becomes stronger, its articulation clearer and buy-in further increased.

Obviously, if one person ultimately wields final authority over a breakthrough idea, their approval must be gained before its potential can be realized. However, even that critical step can be staged over more than one encounter, with the opportunity to introduce further refinements and new possibilities at each. More importantly, the group can earn that final approval in step-wise increments -- learning which aspects of the proposed solution "work" and which might need further work. Progressed in this manner, "final approval" is nothing more than a confirmation that all previously identified issues have been satisfactorily addressed. Thus, we often plan from the beginning of a project for the final event to be a "celebration" of achievement rather than some awesome hurdle to clear.

HOW WAS "BRILLIANT MEETINGS PROCESS" DEVELOPED?

The **Brilliant Meetings Process**[®] is a structured approach for helping organizations achieve important breakthroughs by means of effective, results-oriented collaboration. The concept of using a systematic approach for achieving important breakthroughs first came to light in a series of highly successful experiences in helping underperforming organizations achieve major turnarounds. A clearly-defined and repeatable process evolved over time; supported by decades of research into the subjects of group dynamics, group creativity and results-focused dialogue. The resulting Process is ideally suited to a concentrated series of meetings, such as those occurring in an organization realignment project. In this environment, participants have an opportunity to untangle complex issues and, at the same time, build the interpersonal skills necessary to support increasingly productive collaboration. However, many of the techniques used in our Process can be applied to maximize results and buy-in generated in a single important meeting.