Reframing Resistance in Spiritual Conversation:
Strategies[1] for Facilitators of Community Meetings

Brian Conley, SJ
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We've all been there – we've all participated in small groups where a member

- gives a long, rambling, discourse that is tangentially related to the topic under discussion;
- remains silent until the group is on the verge of a decision – then brings in a crucial piece of information – or brings the information in after the decision is made;
- felt overwhelmed by a flood of jargon laden input.

Each of us could give our version of participating in a frustrating small group dynamic.

Many of us have felt helpless as we've watched the energy in a small group evaporate or build in frustration only to be discharged in outrage, arguing, and hurt feelings. As facilitators, we may have felt helpless to intervene in a productive way because someone's feelings were going to be hurt no matter what we would have done.

We've all been there because these are common experiences in working with small groups – but they are not inevitable. This document seeks to help the facilitators of a three-round communal discernment group to notice shifts in the energy in the group – and to think through potential interventions before the group occurs. This document is not a script. Rather, it seeks to help facilitators take skills they already have in one context and apply those skills to small group facilitation.

Use of these skills developed in other contexts will help make an intervention here more authentic and comfortable for the facilitator. For example, a facilitator may know quite a bit about redirecting a student whose comment is taking the class in a direction not supportive of the lesson plan. A spiritual director may know quite a lot about interrupting a directee to discern whether a movement is coming from a good spirit or an evil spirit before the

directee describes the actions to be taken based on the promptings of that spirit. As we explore together some common experiences in small groups and how a facilitator might intervene – keep in mind the skills you use in other contexts and how they will apply to this context.

Like a teacher leading a classroom, the facilitator of the small group monitors the flow of energy/information in real time in the midst of a meeting. The interventions may be similar – but we would not run a high school first-year theology class the same way we would lead a graduate seminar on the same topic. While prayer, discernment, and even planning may be familiar to everyone in the group, we cannot expect everyone in the group to be familiar with the three round sharing methodology. Thus, interventions to remind the group of their roles, goals, and context are important.

Roles, Goals, Context

<u>Roles</u>

When we look at roles, we are looking at a set of behaviors. The behaviors may contribute to the group process or detract from it. If the role detracts from the process, we want to intervene to bring the member back to the task at hand.

We all enact a variety of roles each day – both formal roles like presider, teacher, or spiritual director and informal roles like encourager, advice giver, or observer. In the three round group discernment model, everyone is asked to take a discerning role with brief intentional speaking and deep listening. The discerner brings the experience of one's prayer to the group in round one and gives voice to the perception of the movement of spirits in the group during round two.

Some members of the group may be tempted to shift to a more comfortable role for them – like lecturer or silent observer. The lecturer will want to give a discourse on the history of planning processes in the province or Vatican II or a recent General Congregation. The silent observer will do just that – remain silent and observe. Note that in both roles, the group does not get any information about the movement of spirits in that member – the behavior (or role) detracts from the group process.

With the lecturer, we might interrupt by affirming the importance of the history (or whatever topic the lecturer is lecturing about) and remind the member that we are hoping to hear about the movement of spirits. For the silent member, we might affirm the right to not share the fruit of their prayer but insist that they say something like "I'll pass," which will interrupt the role behavior (silence) and perhaps prompt more sharing. We might also remind the group of the importance of hearing all voices and hearing how the Spirit is moving in everyone.

As facilitators, we might pause to consider how we would approach other common roles in a group (such as pot stirrer, provocateur, rebel) and think of ways we might redirect their behavior.

Goals

Groups may pursue both explicit and implicit goals. The explicit goals for a group are the stated goals of the group. The explicit goal may be determined by the group itself or by some external authority (e.g., a Provincial or a Community Superior). The implicit goal is what the group is actually doing. The lecturer described above may have an implicit goal of shifting from the discussion from something uncomfortable (making cuts in the community budget) to a more comfortable topic (lecturing on a familiar topic). The silent member may have an implicit goal of avoiding the conflict over which part of the budget to cut by staying silent and not taking a stand. In the spiritual conversation model, each round has its own explicit goal.

- In round one, the explicit goal is to surface the fruit of the members' prayer.
- In round two, the explicit goal is to surface the movement of spirits in each member from his deep listening to others in round one.
- In round three, the explicit goal of the sharing is to discern the movement of the spirits in the group based on the sharing in the previous rounds. If there is a clear movement of the Spirit in the group, the goal may be to complete a task (such as the points to include in a report to the Provincial). It is important to assess an apparent consensus. Sometimes, in small group dynamics, a proposed solution results from compliant agreement, but not real commitment). In a group where the movement of the Spirit is not clear, the third round may be a chance to continue the discernment through discussion, questions, or planning for next steps.

We will probably observe a conflict of goals at some point. We would see a goal conflict in comments that direct the conversation towards "How do we get the Provincial to assign more Jesuits here?" or "How do we make sure the planning process benefits our school/parish/region?" Such interventions are short-circuiting the process. An intervention might look like, "What part of your prayer leads you to look for ways to get more Jesuits assigned here?" or "Getting more Jesuits assigned is an important question, but not the goal for this meeting, how did you experience the movement of spirits in your prayer…."

Context

Context refers to specific time and place of the discussion. Each of the three community meetings will be a different context – perhaps with different goals and questions. The Jesuit community meetings and the regional gatherings are also different contexts. Comments that direct attention away from the current context to the past ("I don't know what the

plans are based on our last discussion") or future ("If we say this – it would be bad for our school/parish/region"). A facilitator's intervention here might be to remind the member of the context:

> *Member* (in the first round): "It is really important that we emphasize the importance of secondary education in our report to the provincial because…."
>
> *Facilitator* [interrupting]: "The content of the report is very important, but it is part of our third round. Right now, can you tell us what happened in your prayer that leads you to emphasize the importance of secondary education?"

REDUCING/REDIRECTING ANXIETY

Anxiety is a common experience in a new group. Even a small community that has been together for years will be a new group if the context is new, like a new question to discern or a new experience of the three-round discernment process. Anxiety on the edge of something new is deeply embedded in our DNA as a survival strategy. Think about the first human being who encountered a saber tooth tiger – the person who approached and said "here kitty, kitty, kitty" did not survive very long. The human being who withdrew to the cave and watched what happened next or who aggressively drove the tiger off likely survived much longer.

In group processing literature, the anxious responses are often labeled "fight, flight, or freeze." Since these behaviors in human beings developed even before our brains developed as a species, the anxious response does not always correspond to what is happening around us: we can become anxious about a paper tiger in the room as well as a real tiger until we assess the reality of which is which.

One way to alleviate anxiety is to help the anxious member(s) monitor whether there is real danger present and to bring them into the moment by asking them to ground themselves (feel their feet on the floor) or to breathe into their belly until they realize there is no imminent danger in the room. It might look like this:

> *Member:* "I'm really anxious that this process is going to end up with our school being closed. We are so on the edge right now – any reduction in province support will put us out of business…"
> *Facilitator* [interrupting if necessary}: "You're worried that this process might end up in the closing of the school?"
> *Member:* (affirms verbally or non-verbally)
> *Facilitator:* "Is the decision to close the school going to be made in this moment?"
> *Member*: "No, but… "
> *Facilitator*: "Take a minute. Let that sink in: the school is not going to be closed tonight. Do you feel less anxious as that sinks in? Do you see the movement to look at our school as the work of the Holy Spirit or another spirit?"

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The Force Field: A Way of Tracking the Flow of Energy in the Group

One way of understanding the task of a small group facilitator is helping the group to monitor the flow of information/energy in the group so the group does not become overwhelmed by too much information or bored by too little energy/information.

In the 1940's, Kurt Lewin developed a tool for understanding the flow of information in both individuals and groups: Force Field Analysis. Centering his analysis around the prospect of change, a force field defines a set of **specific behaviors** that help a group move towards its explicit goals – called **driving forces** – and a set of specific behaviors that function as an obstacle to achieving the explicit goals – called **restraining forces**.

Reframing "resistance" as "restraining force" helps the facilitator take behaviors that we label as resistance less personally. Taking the behaviors less personally allows the facilitator to respond with more understanding and compassion. Some resistance to change is a part the experience of all human beings – and resistance to change can be in service to the group or organization by inviting a more thorough review of the potential consequences of a proposed change.

Lewin's theory suggests that reducing the easiest restraining forces will help a group develop toward their stated (or explicit) goals. The restraining forces point to the implicit goals in the system – what is what the group is actually doing. When the group's implicit goal does not support of the explicit goal – a timely intervention, usually an interruption, to redirect the specific behaviors to support the explicit goal may be helpful.

In his document "A Reflection on Productive and Counter Productive Predispositions for Engaging Apostolic Planning" (May 2022)**,** John Swope S.J. has begun to name some pre-dispositions that point to both driving and restraining forces in our communal discernment process. Translating John's document into a force field, as a first step toward reframing resistance and exploring specific facilitator interventions might look like this.

Explicit Goal of the Spiritual Conversation:
Discern the movement of spirits in this community to inform the planning process

Driving Forces	*Restraining Forces*
→ 1. making "growth in interior freedom" a regular topic of conversation with a spiritual director → 2. First round sharing is focused on the experiences in prayer period e.g. "I found my attention drawn to the suggested scripture passage from Isaiah 'See I'm doing a new thing.' I found myself both excited and nervous as I prayed about working together in new ways…." → 3. Sharing in the second round is focused on one's own experience as they listened in first round, e.g. "I found myself feeling excited when X described his work with the homeless…"	← 1. Feeling a threat to one's comfort zone – e.g. "I did not like the provincial's question about criteria for allocating resources, so I considered the question "which schools should we stop supporting?" – and … [then describes how it is every school but the one this member works at…) ← 2. Distrusting the process that is being proposed…e.g. "I know that all of this talk about allocating resources is just a way for New York to get their hands on Maryland's money…." ← 3. Brooding over similar experiences with frustrating results…e.g. "I don't know how many of these planning processes I've participated in but after the last one I swore I wouldn't participate unless I had a guarantee that there would be change. Can you guarantee me that there will be real change from this process?"

The list of potential driving and restraining forces is infinite. The purpose of this list is not to name all driving and restraining forces. Rather, the purpose is to consider how a facilitator might intervene to reduce restraining forces.

As our explicit goal is gathering data about the movement of spirits in this community in service of the provincial's planning process, the specific behavior of the first restraining force – changing the question – points to an implicit goal. The implicit goal may be moving to a more comfortable place – i.e., to consider a question I know the answer to rather than a question that I don't know the answer. The implicit goal may be holding the *status quo* or protecting one's own turf. The implicit goal may be a natural tendency to take a contrary view to the view presented by the formal authority. It is not necessary to diagnose the implicit goal exactly – but seeing that an implicit goal is present reminds us that the individual is acting, consciously or unconsciously, toward a goal they may perceive as good.

This insight allows us to respond compassionately to the individual while redirecting the person's sharing to the explicit goal. In this case, a detailed description of what schools the province should stop supporting will not help us to gather data about the movement of spirits. What might an intervention that seeks to accomplish this redirection look like?

> *Fr X:* "I did not like the provincial's question about criteria for allocating resources; so, I considered the question 'which schools should we stop supporting...'
> *Facilitator* [Interrupting]: "X, you chose to consider a different question, how did you experience the movement of spirits that prompted you to change the question... "
> Or
> *Facilitator* [Interrupting]: "X, the question of which schools to stop supporting may well be an important question for us to consider at some point. Right now, you've moved ahead of us a bit. Can you tell us whether your experience in considering your question was consoling or desolating?"
> Or
> *Facilitator* [Interrupting]: "X, that question may well be an important question for us to consider at some point. Let's see how the spirits moved the rest of the group – and bring the thoughts you have about the schools into the third round."

Notice that the interventions begin with a reflection of X's input to this point. Beginning with such a reflection allows X to know that he has been heard and understood. The first two suggested responses then re-direct X to the formal goal of the group and the first-round sharing by inviting X to share about the movement of spirits. The third suggested intervention invites X to hold the input he has begun to articulate to a later round (when it may be closer to the explicit goal). This intervention shifts attention away from X and to the rest of the group -as well as to the explicit goal. It is likely that more than one intervention will be necessary to redirect X from the implicit goal to the explicit goal.

The interventions would have these characteristics:

1. An interruption of the restraining behavior.
2. A reflection on the content shared by a group member – with an affirmation that the content is important to a different context.
3. A redirection to the explicit goal using (i) a broad question ("How did you experience ...?"); (ii) a narrow question that sets parameters ("Was your experience more consoling or desolating?") or (iii) invites the member to hold the content for the moment and bring the content into a different context ("Bring that into round three if it still seems relevant").

Next Steps

All who have been asked to facilitate a small group as part of a spiritual conversation will bring their own skills, talents, and expertise. Some of the examples in this document may have triggered your imagination on how you may have intervened based on your background and experience. Allowing your imagination to run and finding your resources

for this process is a good next step. Allowing your imagination to run does not mean that you can get the members of your small group to follow the script you prepared in your imagination. It does mean that you can consider responses that you can make with authenticity and confidence based on your experience.

Over the summer, I will be leading a workshop for Community Superiors on "Strategies for Managing Resistance in Small Group Gatherings." This workshop will be recorded. Community Superiors will be encouraged to share it with those Jesuits who will be small group facilitators, and then lead a discussion with them to share ideas.

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[1] The strategies presented in this document draw on Systems Centered Theory, developed by Yvonne Agazarian and trademarked by the Systems Centered Research Institute and the System for Analyzing Verbal Interactions developed by Yvonne Agazarian and Anita Simon. For additional information on these theories see www.systemscentered.org and www.savi.org.