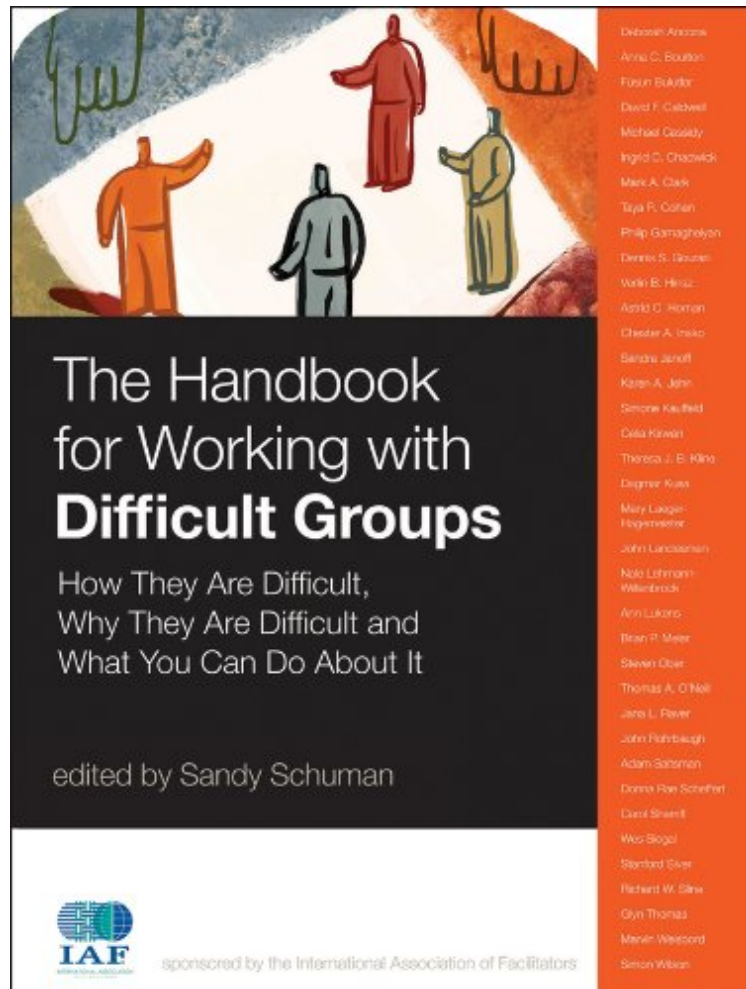


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# The Handbook for Working with Difficult Groups: How They Are Difficult, Why They Are Difficult and What You Can Do About It (J-B International Association of Facilitators)

Sandy Schuman

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**Sandy Schuman : The Handbook for Working with Difficult Groups: How They Are Difficult, Why They Are Difficult and What You Can Do About It (J-B International Association of Facilitators)** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Handbook for Working with Difficult Groups: How They Are Difficult, Why They Are Difficult and What You Can Do About It (J-B International Association of Facilitators):

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Getting a Bird's Eye View by Andrew Rixon By Stephen Thorpe Excerpted with permission from: Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal, No. 11 (2011). pp.

53-56. copy; 1999-2012 International Association of Facilitators. For full information visit [...]Book Review by Andrew Rixon

Getting a Bird's Eye View Right from the beginning, with a title of handbook, this book suggests a practical focus and a strong sense of being a resource. This is true. It is a sizeable book with some 422 pages and a list of over 30 author/contributors. I found it an exciting book to consider. A Google search on "working with difficult groups" provided some 438 million results. Typing in "difficult groups" returned a listing of 226 books. Some of the thoughts that started to emerge for me were: What are the current developments that this book will shed light on? What are the themes and perspectives that will be brought to bear? What is the state of the art of group facilitation when it comes to "working with difficult groups"? What theoretical footing does this book provide access to? And, being an edited book, how does the introduction provide a frame which pulls this altogether to help the reader prepare for the journey ahead?

Flicking through the book, I'm impressed to find a list of key terms at the end of the book. These key terms are not your usual suspects by any means. There is a lot you can learn from just browsing through this list and tracing back to the chapters where they are mentioned. Some of the key words that grabbed my attention were: alternative story, archetypes, covert opposition, eldership, ghost role, hall of mirrors, social capital and timespirit. Finally, with a listing of 20 chapters covering a diverse range of topics such as Facilitating Multicultural Groups to Virtual Teams: Difficult in all Dimensions to The Hero's Journey: Helping Inflexible Groups - and Inflexible Facilitators - Get Unstuck, I ponder how it is that I'll be able to write a review of such a gigantic compendium of knowledge and wisdom!

Every Inside has an Outside Fortunately, I find that the introduction for this handbook really helps to provide an overall framework by which you can navigate the book. Like Ken Wilbur sums up with his insight: every inside has an outside; the editor's introduction provides a framing of three factors that contribute to group performance. Like the outside of a circle, every group operates within a context and an environment. Like the line of the circle itself, every group has a structure and a composition. And finally, like the inside of the circle, every group has an interaction and process. As the editor, Sandy Schuman, explains it is the interaction across the three areas of Context, Structure and Process that provide the interesting and dynamic interplay within what we may see as being a "difficult group". This framing provides the first useable "model" for a practical way of working with difficult groups. As a practitioner and group facilitator, it brings to mind some powerful questions that I could ask and explore, such as: Which of the three areas could be making this a difficult group? How is context, structure or process contributing to the group being "difficult"?

Having made sense of how the book is organised, and how the introduction helps to orient the reader to what lies ahead in the next 20 chapters, I've decided to focus on three particular chapters which I found to be the standouts within the book.

Keeping Difficult Situations from Becoming Difficult Groups I first learnt of the work of Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff through their book Don't Just Do Something, Stand There! Ten Principles for Leading Meetings That Matter (2007). Following in a similar vein, their chapter on Keeping Difficult Situations from Becoming Difficult Groups explores the power of enabling functional sub-grouping by keeping people connected. They share the simple yet profound intervention of asking the "anyone else" question. Like they claim - it is a practice that is stunningly simple, yet one which I have also seen work its magic. As the authors say on page 10: "By finding an ally, in effect creating a subgroup, we acted to help the group accept frustration rather than turn it into further aggression" and further, on page 15: "Our practice relies on recognising the existence of informal subgroups that form and re-form around every statement that people make". How might you pay attention to the existence of informal subgroups that are forming and re-forming during the course of a meeting? How might you ask the "anyone else..." question? When considering the complexities of the role the facilitator has within such a dynamic, I think the authors comment on page three captures something worth reflecting on: "We seek to minimize 'authority projections' - that is, having people turn to us as saviours, or turn on us as enemies. Rather, we invite people to be responsible for themselves".

Interaction Archetypes: Keys to Group Difficulty and Productivity Being a visual person, as well as someone who is fascinated by the richness of Role Theory (Blatner, 2006), the chapter on Interaction Archetypes: Keys to Group Difficulty and Productivity provides the reader, what I believe, is another great tool for thinking about and intervening into "difficult groups". Drawing on what's known as the Kantor 4 player model (Kantor Lehr, 1975), the author highlights and brings to life "interaction archetypes" based on the four types of actions that commonly make up sequences of interactions within groups. Those being:- Move: Initiates a sequence of interactions.- Follow: Supports one of the other actions.- Oppose: Challenges another action.- Bystand: Observes the interactions in ways that help the group move toward desired results.

From these four types of actions, the author describes four "interaction archetypes" along with the use of a common template for each, for example, Key Behavioral Sequence, Description, Impact on Results, Relationship to Other Forces, and What Facilitators Can Do. The four "interaction archetype" patterns explored were: Point-Counterpoint, Courteous Compliance, Covert Opposition, and The Hall of Mirrors. This method affirms to me the author's claim of how the patterns are a "powerful tool for seeing and enhancing group performance". For example, with the Point-Counterpoint pattern, how often have you observed the dynamic of someone in a meeting proposing a way forward only to be met with a series of "Opposes". Or, my favourite, the Hall of Mirrors pattern where a "Move" is met with a series of "Bystanding". Like the authors suggest, whilst there are times when the motto "Don't just do something, sit there and reflect" has value and power, the Hall of Mirrors demonstrates a time when "Don't just sit there and reflect, do something!" comes into play. From a role theory

perspective, I find it interesting to note the power of helping to bring to life roles in the system that are currently inactive and how doing this may help in resolving the "stuckness" in the current interaction pattern. Difficult Groups or Difficult Facilitators? It is both refreshing and important that the final chapter in the book explores how the facilitator themselves may be the problem. In the chapter Difficult Groups or Difficult Facilitators? three steps facilitators can take to make sure they are not the problem, Glyn Thomas sets out what I believe could probably be the most important chapters for group facilitators to become aware of. The three problem areas for facilitators themselves that the author outlines are: Unclear Purposes and Mis-aligned Activities; Defensive and Over-reactive Communication; and Abuses of Power. With these problem areas identified, the author suggests the associated three steps of: Facilitating Intentionally, Developing High Levels of Self-Awareness, and Increasing Awareness of Power and Rank. Being a practitioner, I read these with interest, and also intrigue. It made me think about how the education of becoming an effective group facilitator is one which needs to touch into many aspects, and maybe most importantly, the area of self-awareness. No wonder many talk about "going on the journey" of learning to be a group facilitator ... possibly one that never ends. Reflections The final aspect that I think this leads to is giving consideration to "facilitator self-care". Whilst it is a topic which isn't actually directly covered within the book, the book does acknowledge how leading and facilitating a group is a challenging role. It is a role that does require a high level of self-awareness, as well as resilience. When the work becomes difficult--either because of the group or the facilitator--there is an inner journey to manage. And even more particularly, as a group facilitator, how do you cope? What sustains you when things get tough? How do you debrief after a difficult group experience? How do you notice if you're being too tough on yourself? (see Rixon, 2011) Looking back on my journey through The Handbook for Working with Difficult Groups I have found it to have been a worthwhile read. A useful read. A valuable read. It's a book which I'm sure I'll be returning to. References Blatner, A. (2006, May). Role Dynamics: An integrative approach to psychology and user-friendly language. Retrieved on 11/3/2006 from: [...] Kantor, D., Lehr, W. (1975). Inside The Family. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Weisbord, M., Janoff, S. (2007). Don't Just Do Something, Stand There!: Ten Principles for Leading Meetings That Matter. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler. Wilber, K. (2006). Excerpt C: The Ways we are in this together. Intersubjectivity and interobjectivity in the holonic cosmos. Retrieved from: [...] Rixon, A. (2011, 30 May) Are you too hard on yourself? [Web log message]. Retrieved from: [...] Rixon, A. (2011). Getting a Bird's Eye View. [Review of The handbook for working with difficult groups: How they are difficult, why they are difficult, and what you can do about it]. Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal Volume 10, 11, 53-56.

Praise for The Handbook for Working with Difficult Groups "Beginning with a conceptual framework useful to understand effective group functioning, The Handbook for Working with Difficult Groups continues with twenty chapters, each describing a common challenge a facilitator can face, examining the research available to understand the difficulty, and then offering pragmatic interventions a facilitator can use to deal with this challenge. A must-read for any group facilitator." — David Straus, founder, Interaction Associates "If you're looking for ways to make your team more productive, you'll find golden nuggets written just for your situation in The Handbook for Working With Difficult Groups. A compendium of research and sage advice, this book offers experienced insights into how to transform seemingly dysfunctional groups and avoid obstacles before you hit them. Should be in the library of any leader or facilitator!" — Tammy Adams, CPF, president, Chaosity LLC "This fine book contains a rich diversity of case studies, approaches and wise counsel from leading practitioners working with groups. It will help you to understand and facilitate effectively in even the most difficult situations." — Dale Hunter, author, The Art of Facilitation: The Essentials for Leading Great Meetings and Creating Group Synergy "Whether you are a facilitator, leader, or member of a group, you will gain surprising insights into why a group is difficult, and more importantly, how to recognize the cause of the difficulty and how to develop an effective response to move the group forward." — Gary Rush, CPF, president, MGR Consulting; chair, International Association of Facilitators (IAF)

From the Inside Flap We've all experienced the challenges associated with working with groups, but The Handbook for Working with Difficult Groups turns the idea of "difficult groups" on its head. Rather than view groups as inherently difficult, it looks at the factors that make working with groups difficult. Individual chapters focus on challenges such as involving dissenters, building external perspectives, reducing complaining, adapting to cultural differences, incorporating diversity, facilitating inclusion, working virtually, resolving identity-based conflict, transforming unproductive behavior patterns, preventing workplace harassment, and The book first provides a framework for thinking systemically about the many and varied ways in which working with a group can be difficult. Building on that framework, the contributors each address three basic issues: How the group is difficult—a description of a real group and the observable phenomena that reflect the group's difficulty. Why the group is difficult—an exploration of the underlying causes of the difficulty. What you can do about it—what you can do as a group facilitator, leader, or member to help the group. About the Author Sandy Schuman has been helping organizations work more effectively to solve complex problems and make critical decisions for more than thirty years. He is a group facilitator, collaborative process advocate, and storyteller. He helps groups create shared meaning, make critical choices, and build

collaborative relationships. He facilitates problem-solving and decision-making processes for a wide variety of public management and policy issues and provides training in group facilitation, decision making, systems thinking, conflict management systems, and organizational communication. He is the editor of the International Association of Facilitators handbook series: *The IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation*, *Creating a Culture of Collaboration*, and *Working with Difficult Groups*.