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## Facilitating for Transformation in our Times

By Yabome Gilpin-Jackson

“The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener.”

—Bill O’Brien

In so many conversations, people around me—family, friends and practitioners in Leadership, Organization Development and Social Change—are asking what can I do myself when I’m upset and/or mad about what’s happening? This question comes up whether in conversations about North American politics or global social change, and it is not a simple question with an easy or standard answer. The ensuing dialogue and responses have ranged from fear and hopelessness to apathy, desperate activism, thoughtful analysis, and committed action. None of these responses are right or wrong. I have found myself at all points of the spectrum depending on the day or the latest breaking news. These responses are normal human reactions to complexity, the unknown, and the chaotic.

In the book *Dialogic Organization Development: The Theory and Practice of Transformative Change*, I write about how to facilitate transformative learning primarily from the client-group perspective in the three stages of Initiating, Facilitating, and Sustaining a transformational change

process. In response to the question at hand, I offer ideas for practitioners/facilitators to prepare themselves for facilitating transformation through these same three phases. This is anchored in my belief that practitioners are instruments of transformation. We cannot facilitate others through difficult circumstances if we ourselves are stuck in the circumstances and cannot see a way forward. We need to remember that ALL our institutions are fractals of the larger society. Unless we create a different awareness and actions for ourselves, we will continue to see the issues in our environment replicated in every institutional sphere.

### Stage 1: Initiating Transformation

Initiating a personal transformational change process requires engaging and working through the first three of Mezirow’s (2000) 10 phases of transformation:

1. A disorienting dilemma;
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame;
3. A critical assessment of assumptions;

First, a disorienting dilemma is a situation never before experienced, it disrupts the

status quo way of thinking and leaves one confused, searching for ways to resolve the discomfort. Because it is a dilemma, there is no one ‘right’ answer. A disorientating dilemma is a signal that there is something to listen to, to learn or understand better. At this stage, all that is required is recognition of being perturbed and a willingness to engage rather than run from the causes of disorientation.

Second, examine the emotional state that arises from the situation, and engage the emotions associated with the disorienting dilemmas. This can involve feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame. Facilitators cannot help others if they cannot face and immediately process and address their own emotional responses that may be painful in the moment.

The third phase entails a conscious, critical, examination of the assumptions held about the situation. We must continue to critically face the implications. Unless we do, we cannot effectively and constructively engage to realize transformational change.

### Stage 2: Facilitating Transformation

The next 3 phases of Mezirow’s transformation journey are:

4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the processes of transformation are shared;
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions;
6. Planning a course of action;

Thoughts on what practitioners can do to prepare themselves for facilitating clients through these phases include:

**Find a Transformative Learning Community.** Recognizing the shared nature of discontent is the first phase of the actual “facilitation” phase of transformation. To practice what we preach, facilitators must find at least a partner and ideally a community of practitioners who can help us through the transformation journey to examine our own untested assumptions, doubts, fears, and hopes. Through reflective discourse and exploration, we move toward self-transformation as our

worldviews are stretched and expanded by listening to the diverse experiences of others and being able to freely share our own. It is in its simplest form, the experience of knowing—I am not alone in this learning journey and I have a safe space in which to go through my own process—that unlocks transformation.

**Explore New and Different Options.** A transformative journey begins by asking new and different questions that lead to

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innovative ways to address the original dilemmas. Ask challenging questions while staying open to explore:

- » What can I do now? What role do I want in this situation?
- » What new relationships will support me in my own self-transformation journey?
- » Where and with whom do I feel safe to share my own disorientating dilemmas about the current world system to engage in genuine discourse and learning?
- » How do I want to be in relationship to those around me who hold similar and different worldviews?
- » What is my own identity and worldview of the various moral questions we face and how does that color my world?
- » What new outcomes do I want for myself?

**Commit to Action.** Finally, plan a course of action and embark on it. Each of us must model the leadership and transformation

we are asking of others. To facilitate transformation, we must go first and commit to taking actions toward our own self-transformation.

### Stage 3: Sustaining Transformation

What happens when we recognize a disorienting dilemma, work through the interior emotional state, and critically assess the underlying assumptions triggering the process? What happens after we realize it is

a shared dilemma, explore supportive roles and relationships, weigh options and plan next steps? This is often where transformation journeys fall apart; the space between planning and action. Intention must translate into action before transformative learning can be fully realized, integrated and sustained. The final four phases are:

7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans;
8. Provisional trying of new roles;
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective.

These four steps are easier said than done because transformation—that fundamental change in worldview and behaviors as a result of expanded perspectives—is hard work. In the early days, transformed thinking requires consistent action for the change to be evident in who we are,

in our relationships and in what we do. This is true of any behavioral change—it requires practice to become habit. Sustaining transformation is less about getting over the change challenges and much more about not giving up after trying and initially failing. Sustaining transformation requires patience and perseverance in addition to the passion that transformation often evokes before desired outcomes can be realized.

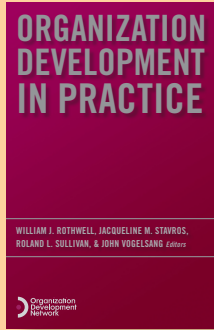
What happens when we try a new role or action in a transformation and it does not work? For example, imagine if, as a facilitator, you experience a transformation using the above stages and decide to facilitate diversity dialogues and host social change discussion circles. In your first attempts, you feel incompetent in your new role and you say things that participants find offensive. Building your competence and confidence will come by persevering as a learner and facilitator through the discomfort of apparent failures. How do you persevere? You simply do. There is no formula. In the current world state, it is better to try, fail, learn and try again—than not to try at all. Inaction is colluding. Trying, failing, and learning—that's leading.

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Editors

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The *ODP* is a peer reviewed journal. Authors can choose between two review processes and should notify the Editor which they prefer when they submit an article:

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## Guidelines for Authors (contd.)

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Authors should email articles to the editor, John Vogelsang, at [jvogelsang@earthlink.net](mailto:jvogelsang@earthlink.net). The deadlines for submitting articles are as follow: **October 1** for the winter issue; **January 1** for the spring issue; **April 1** for the summer issue; and **July 1** for the fall issue.

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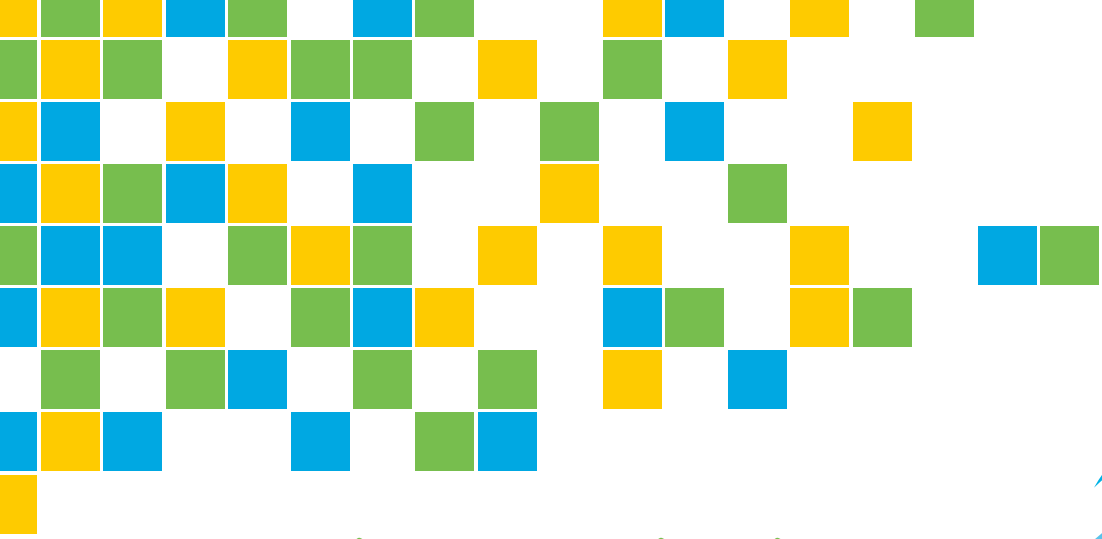
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