

Whitewater Rapid Rating Scale

Tactics for Facilitating Performance Improvement

Facilitating groups of people is a lot like river running: There's need for a recognition of skills, a diagnosis of probable difficulties and a required plan of action in order to successfully get through the situation upright and only a little wet!

Here is a simple framework for aligning the challenges of working in groups with those of getting downstream successfully. First, I'll define a whitewater condition and then compare it with the same level of group facilitation. Recognize that *anyone* can be an effective facilitator, be it a team leader working with his peers on the shopfloor or a Most Senior Manager leading a discussion session to those people who actually get paid to do this professionally. The tools and preparation simply need to be related to the situation and one can always improve one's skill whether navigating difficult or easy waters.

Class 1: Easy. Fast moving water with riffles and small waves. Few obstructions, all obvious and easily avoided with little training. Risk to swimmers is slight; self-rescue is easy.

Ah, in the facilitation world, this would be a “no brainer” – a situation that is truly simple to facilitate. The issue is clear, the objectives are defined, the people are supportive and see a need for improvement and you already have the skills you need. Maybe one of your facilitation tools fits easily to the problem and will work within the time lines for generating solutions to the solution. You should be able to float right through this. There are no real politics involved and no anticipated surprises. Maybe the team has been through a similar and successful problem-solving situation with you before and they have already gone through all of the storming and are into the performing stage.

This Class 1 facilitation can be done by anyone with few problems. All that is needed is a focus on involving and engaging the participants to minimize resistance and using some group thinking process to reach a consensus on what to do and when to do it.

The only difference between Class 1 and a lake is that the scenery moves while you sit there! All you need to do is keep your balance and keep things moving forward. Simple skills are needed along with some way of recording the journey for future reflection. If you do flip over – probably because you were not paying attention – you can simply hop out, stand up, and get seated again with few problems (*only you may now be all wet and a little embarrassed!*).

Class 2: Novice. Straightforward rapids with wide, clear channels which are evident without scouting. Occasional maneuvering may be required, but rocks and medium-sized waves are easily missed by trained paddlers. Swimmers are seldom injured and group assistance, while helpful, is seldom needed.

Okay. You can see where you want to go and there are few perceived obstacles possibly needing some course correction as you move ahead, but no need to scout things beforehand. It is as if you can walk into the session, see quickly what needs to be done and know the things you need to avoid. You could run this rapid in the dark, just by listening to the water, simply because it makes some noise as it moves over most obstacles.

Maybe you have a good sense of what the group manager will support and she has already clarified her expectations with you. But the situation may not have a clear path to follow. Expect that you may have to change directions to get to the desired results. You have a few tools with you to use if you get into one of those places where a change of direction is needed.

If you do make a mistake, you can correct it with little difficulty. This situation may require a couple of meetings over time, but there are few restraints so long as you can move the group forward, generate agreement and consensus, and put an action plan together. Most people are viewed as cooperative and the resources you need are all there.

Here you will want to paddle some to move about. You might have a useful tool to generate ideas as something optional you could add. I would guess that most managers who ask questions, listen to answers and who will make suggestions or collect ideas for team agreement are paddling in these waters.

These are some situations that might cause brand new supervisors a bit of consternation and nervousness, simply because they are not used to asking for ideas and helping groups process them. Often, a simple discussion with HR or with their manager would be enough to get them into the water and maneuvering in the stream. No special training is required but having some prior experience in facilitating problem-solving sessions would be beneficial. Newbies, running rapids for the first time, mostly handle themselves just fine! Self-rescue is pretty easy, too.

Class 3: Intermediate. Rapids with moderate, irregular waves that may be difficult to avoid. Complex maneuvers in fast current and good boat control in tight passages or around ledges are often required; large waves or strainers may be present but are easily avoided. Strong eddies and powerful current effects can be found, particularly on large-volume rivers. Scouting is advisable for

inexperienced parties. Injuries while swimming are rare; self-rescue is usually easy but group assistance may be required to avoid long swims.

Well, these are situations where you begin to earn your paycheck as a facilitator. And these are really pretty common rapids in most fast-moving rivers or organizations. All the easy runs have been done and now you want to address some of the more difficult whitewater that will test your skills and generate a sense of exhilaration when accomplished. Class 3 rapids have what we call “drops,” where the water plunges down a few feet and the river actually changes levels. Often, the water funnels to a narrow place where you must first position yourself and angle the boat to the river flow to navigate it and, in those narrows, the water is moving fast and pushing at you from different sides. Sound familiar?

For the most part, you can run these if you are experienced in leading groups and have learned to balance yourself while moving in the chaos of working with groups (this does not mean doing powerpoint presentations or standing at the front explaining some new policy or procedure). You might scout the situation by conducting some initial interviews or have some conversations about the issue if you were not familiar with it to get a pretty clear view of what is happening. Perspective is useful.

These Class 3 Facilitations are not political and most things are clearly observed – there are not a lot of unseen obstacles like “hidden agendas” although not everyone should be expected to go along with everything. You might have an adversarial individual who needs to be persuaded or all the resources needed to solve the problem may lie elsewhere. An inter-departmental cross-functional situation might be Class 3, but one where most people would be expected to be supportive.

You would want to know the resources available as well as the desired outcomes and perhaps set up someone downstream who can toss you a rope, if need be. But you also anticipate some surprises. You may not need to align support of the more senior managers for this one, but even that is not totally clear.

Class 3 waves are expected to bounce you around a bit. Due to the possibility of flipping over, one should have a good Eskimo roll – the tools and skills needed to flip the boat back up and continue downstream. You may have to align people to a tight process or procedure to get through a precise spot.

Class 3 practitioners are often able to spot the eddies, calm places that they can maneuver into in order to take a few moments and study things further downstream. Being able to call timeout and disengage is one of the skills we

might see in this facilitator. The need to be calm in a crazy place is also useful. And having a full set of skills and a good bit of practice is very practical when you get hit by that unexpected wave or crash into that boulder that is mostly covered.

In looking at these organizational situations, there are often a variety of different ways to scout the scene and align the help and information you need to be successful. You definitely scout these rapids when seeing them for the first time unless you are truly expert. After running this rapid a few times, though, you learn its nuances and can paddle right up and engage the waves. You can see a lot of things through a practiced glance and do not make a lot of assumptions about how things should be – you react to how things are.

Good managers can generally handle these rapids. Some might want to enlist the aid of a mentor or coach or co-facilitator for assistance. For the most part, you want a partner or partners to accompany you through this whitewater.

Class 4: Advanced. Intense, powerful but predictable rapids requiring precise boat handling in turbulent water. Depending on the character of the river, it may feature large, unavoidable waves and holes or constricted passages demanding fast maneuvers under pressure. A fast, reliable eddy turn may be needed to initiate maneuvers, scout rapids, or rest. Rapids may require “must” moves above dangerous hazards. Scouting may be necessary the first time down. Risk of injury to swimmers is moderate to high, and water conditions may make self-rescue difficult. Group assistance for rescue is often essential but requires practiced skills. A strong Eskimo Roll is *highly* recommended; the ability to right oneself when upside down is quite useful!

Now, these are *always* interesting. Running a Class 4 for the first time is certainly a challenge for most every paddler. There may be large waves you need to pound through in a certain part of the rapid or there may be water pouring over a rock (forming what is called a “hole”) that has the capability of grabbing your boat and stopping all progress and even flipping you over and keeping you stuck. These rapids can be very “tight and technical” and require you to be in one place one second and going in a different direction a moment later. Miss the move and you might wash over the falls sideways or find yourself stuck on a rock in the middle of the flow. Class 4 rapids are generally termed “pushy” and you pay for any mistake you make.

Remember that eddy turn into the calm spot mentioned in the Class 3 write-up? Well, in a long Class 4, you will *need* to be able to make those quick little turns into them! Long Class 4 rapids can be exhausting. Short Class 4 rapids are just big drops with a lot of powerful waves ready to pound you upside down. *(As an aside, your author admits to having swum many of the Class 4 whitewater*

rapids in the US over the years. More skills mean fewer swims. But it sure is nice when someone throws you a rope!)

Situations like these are where you want to look at that toolkit on Facilitation Skills that you bought a few years ago or even pull out your old copy of Peter Block's *Flawless Consulting* and study those notes you made in the margins. You will need to be tuned up and tuned in. You will probably spend more than a few hours interviewing those in the organization who have vested interests in the outcomes as well as those who have experience in implementing change within the culture. Your own past experience will be useful and if you have done these before, that is even better.

You will have to think on your feet, react quickly to build supporters and probably have already determined who might be a passive or even an active saboteur of this initiative and have taken action to pre-empt their efforts to slow progress.

The sense of exhilaration you get from succeeding -- remember, you never win against the river! -- is wonderful. You feel a real sense of accomplishment knowing that your skills worked and your timing was right and you made all the correct maneuvers when you needed to make them.

Class 5: Expert. Extremely long, obstructed, and/or very violent rapids that expose a paddler to serious risk. Drops may contain large, unavoidable waves and holes or steep, congested chutes with complex, demanding routes. Rapids may continue for long distances, demanding a high level of fitness. What eddies exist may be small, turbulent or difficult to reach. At the high end of the scale, several of these factors may be combined. Scouting is recommended but may be difficult. Swims are dangerous, and rescue is often difficult even for experts. A very reliable Eskimo roll, proper equipment, extensive experience, and practiced rescue skills are essential. Because of the large range of difficulty that exists beyond class 4, class 5 is an open ended, multiple level scale designated by class 5.0, 5.1, 5.2, etc. Each of these levels is an order of magnitude more difficult than the last. These rapids *are* runnable, but only by experts and fools.

Here is where you really earn your keep as a facilitator, since Class 5 situations require a great bit of perspective, skill and experience. You might stand there and consider possibilities from the bank for many minutes, looking at the option of being at a certain place at a particular angle and guessing at what happens next versus being over in that place and making this move. Here is where looking at what others have done before to succeed is a good strategy, since you can move like they moved and do what things they did to be successful.

Taking a new route that no one has tried is generally not a good strategy – and watching another boater get trashed is simply confirmation that it was not good thinking!

You need to use all the tricks you know and maybe even ask other more experienced people for all of their tricks. You must have a tight action plan for generating the needed pre-program support as well as the post-program resources and senior manager followup.

You will have to meet with the senior management team, as a group and individually, to generate buy in as well as understand the known and sometimes the unknown issues that underlie the situation.

Class 6: Extreme and Exploratory. These runs have almost never been attempted and often exemplify the extremes of difficulty, unpredictability and danger. The consequences of errors are very severe and rescue may be impossible. For teams of experts only, at favorable water levels, after close personal inspection and after taking all precautions. After a class 6 rapid has been run many times, its rating may be changed to an appropriate class 5.x rating.

Back in the day, I paddled in California with people like Doug Carson, who simply loved to do this stuff. We would normally set up ropes in a half dozen locations on the drop and even have two people at one likely spot in case the throw of the first rope missed. On the flip side, Carson Falls on the Kern River has his name on it since he was the first to run and succeed on this drop. I include a picture of a raft being buried in the river at the first drop before the big hole at the bottom – this at a *modest* flow rate and not high water!



These situations are hazardous. In business situations, you would really want to have a case for why you would want to attempt them. Maybe it is around merging two powerful divisions of the organization into one and there are a lot of egos and power issues involved. Or perhaps there is a long history of

“whitewater” among two workgroups and common ground needs to be established in order for productivity to be improved or systems and procedures to be changed. The facilitator is there to generate agreement and solutions and to help the group solve problems.

These sessions often have lots of politics and hidden agendas with any number of people hoping or even betting their jobs on the initiative’s failure. There are lots of hazardous cross-currents, throbbing waves and rocks and holes. And there is the roar of the water, heard from hundreds of yards away. Even before the session, you may hear people bad mouthing the effort even before it has begun. If there is a union, they have already been in contact with the newspaper and there are articles appearing about how this will cost jobs or other such negative and public problems.

Class 6 facilitations are where you *really* may want to hire an outside, professional facilitator who has been working with your industry for the past 20 years and who has impeccable credentials to guide the organization to a successful outcome. All of the participants in the session might get a copy of his book a month prior to the program so that they understand his credentials and the most senior management will undoubtedly all be interested in the outcome.

If you are doing this personally and have the skills and perspective as well as either body armor or a life jacket, you may want to use strategies such as getting signed agreements as to what people will support, doing specific things to pre-empt saboteurs and sabotage, and have secure top management support with a clear desired outcome. And, you might want to put your resume out for consideration as you plan this one! You may already have an agreement with Scott Adams to document your activities and initiatives as a series of Dilbert cartoons or have a book contract already in the works!

Yeah, these are great fun when they are successfully navigated. But the odds on anyone other than a greatly skilled facilitator successfully running them are pretty low.

After considering these classes of whitewater runs and the corresponding skills needed for each, you may want to classify your own facilitation sessions in a similar way in order to anticipate what skills or tools you’ll need to better manage your own set of rapids. Hope you’ll find this analogy beneficial.

Lastly, recognize that people do have **fun** running rivers!

For some fun whitewater videos, check these out videos on YouTube:

Class 6 rapid - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zm0DjcsyKEk> - 0:43

Some about how hard this sport can be:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sljOcEd6k0I> - 0:37

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjGBTdW2cUs> - 0:20

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38fzPEq2W1U> - 1:09 (raft)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xE5N52V3IR> -- 2:58

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFmBjNxfzVs> -- 4:35

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXi1MfURMgg> - 1:26

See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy40uAgG7Ho> - 0:31

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USea4vM10V0> - 1:42

Some real experts, professionally done short movies:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSXjPG7tY9Y> - 5:14

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEiPBsGfwLE>

Mash and Trash, disaster stuff you really do not even want to think about!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkTESoagox8> - 2:19

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cb9_cJMV1x4 - 0:32

These people make it look easy:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_JJZY9ACBc - 9:59

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For the **FUN** of It!

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