

## Piloting through Unknown Waters

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*There is, however, no universal recipe for scientific advance. It is a matter of groping forward into terra incognita of the outer world by means of methods which should be adapted to the circumstances.*  
*Reinout Willem van Bemmelen<sup>1</sup>*

### **Navigating uncharted waters and unknown territory.**

Facilitating means piloting a group to its destination. Like a local pilot guiding ships through dangerous or congested waters, such as harbors or river mouths. The pilot knows the local waterways well and navigates ships to their destination, or on their way to a longer voyage. He or she 'takes on' a ship, whose crew and destination have been determined by others. The pilot stands next to the captain, as the captain of the ship will stay responsible for the ship. Rarely will the pilot carry the full responsibility. Only when transiting the Panama Canal, does a sea pilot have full responsibility for the navigation.

The facilitator has also no responsibility for the final destination of the group. The leader or manager stays in charge. The facilitator will guide the group through unknown waters or territory - *terra incognita* - to the part where the ship can travel on its own command again. Like an actual pilot, a facilitator will draw up a travel plan, guide the ship and leave when the work is done.

Pilots guide ships, facilitators guide meetings. We meet in order to make sense, to reach a common goal or destination. Professor Homan<sup>2</sup> also points at this<sup>3</sup>. He calls it, following Patricia Shaw<sup>4</sup>, "*gathering to make sense*". Also, a group makes sense of the meeting itself: "*making sense of the gathering*". The meeting itself might create a world on its own and this world might not be the real world. To avoid the risk of creating a world apart from reality, the facilitator has to deal with group dynamics. The facilitator has to make sure that there is space for the unknown, sensing what really is the matter and adapt to the circumstances. By sharing all perspectives, also the unpopular views and facts, subjective judgments can be adjusted to the 'objective' common world. This sharing will lead to the 'common sense' that is needed for effective meetings.

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<sup>1</sup>'The Scientific Character of Geology', The Journal of Geology (Jul 1961), 69, No. 4, 455.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Change and Implementation at the Open University Netherlands

<sup>3</sup> See the Dutch edition of this book: Jan Lelie, Henri Haarmans e.a., 'Faciliteren zonder Omwegen', 2013, ISBN 978-90-78440-65-9

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Patricia Shaw, Changing Conversations in Organizations: A Complexity Approach to Change (Complexity and Emergence in Organizations), 2002, ISBN-13: 978-0415249140

*“Common sense establishes our sense of reality, the sense of sharing a world,”* says Hannah Arendt<sup>5</sup>.

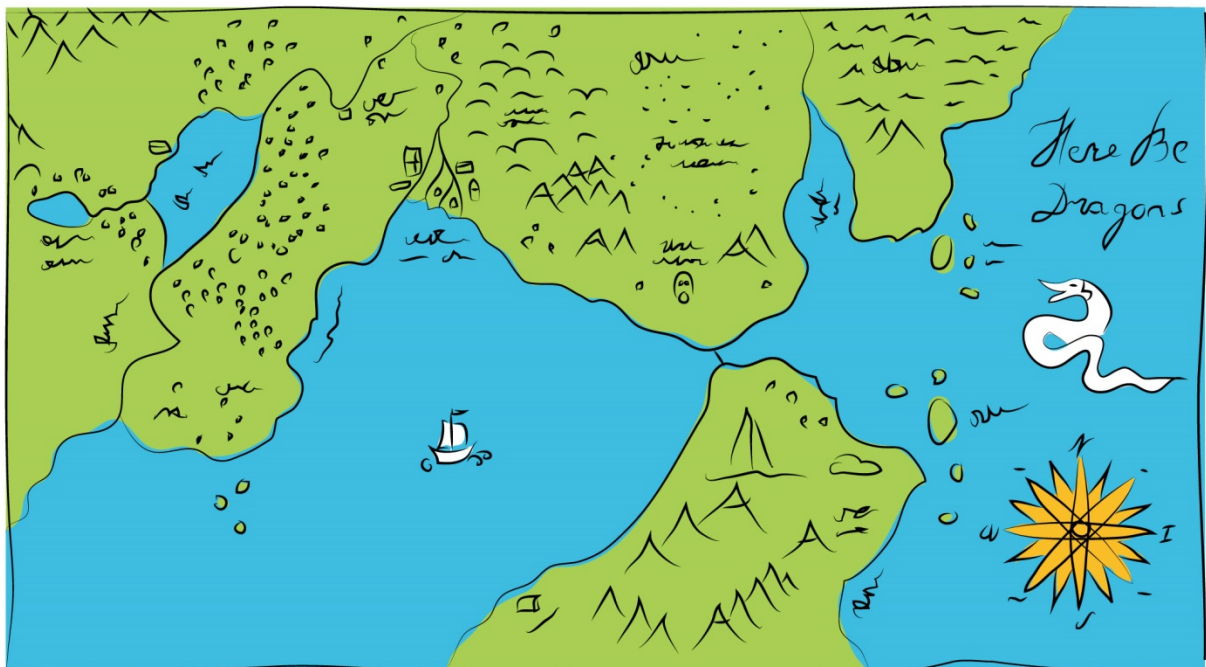
The role of a pilot and facilitator consists of:

- making a design, a travel plan for the voyage,
- executing the travel plan,
- guiding through unknown territories,
- dealing with group dynamics as part of the unknown territories.

Part of the journey can be planned, anticipated. The facilitator designs a strategy to guide the group to their next destination. He or she will show different routes and will help to make choices. The facilitator guides the group during the meeting. At some point, there will be surprises, a change of wind, outside circumstances. These will require an intervention, a change of plan. This is where the unknown waters starts and the group enters ‘terra incognita’.

### **Guiding through unknown territories**

Legend has it that on ancient maps terra incognita was labelled as ‘here be dragons’ or ‘here be lions’. Implicating that one needs to be a hero to enter this unknown territory. The metaphor of the hero is quite suitable when it comes to facilitation.



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<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*, 1961, 1968.

### ***Call to adventure***

Before the meeting and at the beginning of the meeting the facilitator will help to clarify common goals of the group. The facilitator will make sure that all perspectives are present and all stakeholders can contribute. The participants each carry a part of the solution, the elixir, along with them. Therefore it is important to involve the right people, even those reluctant in the beginning.

### ***Entering the unknown and dealing with dragons***

The hero has to conquer dragons on his way to the destination. Groups will also find obstacles on their way. A group working together to achieve certain goals may experience difficulties because of differences between participants, the influence of hierarchy and/or ineffective patterns. This may result in less creative solutions, time consuming discussions or even conflict.

### ***The Elixir***

A facilitator creates an environment that contributes to the quality of the collaboration and decision making. A facilitator enables the group to have constructive interactions and an open, inclusive process so the group can make high-quality decisions. He or she is content neutral and will support everyone to share thoughts and ideas. Participants are responsible for their own contribution and actions. Facilitators do not teach people anything and do not give advice. As a facilitator, you live with the moment; you move along, using what is. It is about sharing the knowledge and experience of people. To make it explicit, create room for cooperation and supported decisions. This carefully created environment makes it possible for new insights to emerge and the elixir to be found.

### ***Return home***

At the end of the meeting the facilitator will have attention for the return home. How will the elixir, the insight, the solution be put into practice? In this phase, the facilitator can help you with the connection with reality: what is needed for acceptance and connection to the existing reality? How is the group going to put what they have learned into practice?

### **Conclusion**

When traveling through unknown territories a facilitator guides the group to a higher level of interaction and decision making. Facilitators raise the level of awareness of the outer world and potential in the group. How does a facilitator do that? In this book you will find 24 practices illustrating the means and methods of facilitators.

*There is, however, no universal recipe for facilitative advance. It is a matter of groping forward into terra incognita of the outer world by means requiring adaption to the circumstances.*