

Building a Culture of Learning: The Experience of Facilitation Wellington Dufferin

From its beginnings in 2006, the leaders of Facilitation Wellington Dufferin (FWD) have been on an intentional learning journey. As a grass roots organization committed to supporting people with developmental disabilities to build meaningful lives in community, FWD has worked tirelessly to build a culture of learning. Facilitators, families, people with disabilities, and the wider community work together to share information, build capacity, and constantly learn and grow.

From the early days, FWD has engaged family members, people with disabilities, interested community allies, and representatives of progressive local service providers. As one of the allies and FWD founders, Dave DeVidi notes, “Having family members on the Board made sure we never lost sight of a crucial fact: it is a big responsibility to have someone place their trust in you by allowing you into their lives to help them plan for their future. We wanted to make sure that we were the sort of organization that would only send out people who were ready to provide facilitation of the highest quality.”

The FWD Board recognized that preparing someone to provide that high quality facilitation required not just formal training but experience and mentoring as well. As Dave DeVidi explains, “We decided that we had to recruit and train our own facilitators, and that the way to do it was with an ‘Apprentice Model.’” Joanna Goode was an experienced facilitator already, so she was well suited to do things like job coaching and offering advice. In those early days, Joanna was educating the board about the nuances of facilitation and what it takes to make it as good as it can be. Dave DeVidi notes that “Joanna became an outstanding trainer of facilitators, while working with the Board to help to turn an idea into an organization. She was acquiring the skills she’d need to someday be an executive director.” Joanna adds that, “Our growth as an organization has come from the understanding that we are all always learning – that saying “I don’t know”, or “can you help me to figure this out” is not a bad thing. I support apprentice facilitators as they develop their facilitation skills, and the FWD board and other allies support me to grow as a mentor and now as a director.”

Formal training is mandatory at FWD and can include training by the Facilitation Leadership Group, MAPS and PATH, and other training events and retreats hosted by leaders in independent facilitation. Facilitator Aviva Samson notes, “The New Story Facilitation training was really exciting – I was able to see what I wanted and hoped for. There was new language and ideas that were very helpful to the craft of facilitation.”

Mentoring is another key aspect of learning within FWD. Aviva remembers her early experiences with mentoring, “Joanna was incredibly patient and supported us to take control of our own learning. It was a new way of thinking and a safe place to explore our own journey.” Similarly, Jodee Jack, currently lead facilitator with FWD, was excited to join an independent facilitation organization as a contrast with her more traditional background in nursing and human services. Jodee explains that “Joanna educated us on what independent facilitation was really like. She emphasized multiple ways of learning and she encouraged us to look for learning everywhere.”

One key to mentoring within FWD is “inside-out learning,” where facilitators are encouraged and supported to learn about themselves as they learn about the craft of Independent Facilitation. Jodee summarizes this insight; “The essence of mentoring for me is the combining of inward and outward learning. Our mentoring is not about teaching, but it is about leaning. The more we learn about ourselves, the more capable we are of treating the people we support with respect.” Mentoring at FWD is about noticing yourself in the context with others. As Aviva put it, “We are always thinking, ‘What are you noticing? What does this mean? What are you feeling about yourself and your context?’” Facilitators at FWD believe that this process of inside-out learning is as important as specific knowledge. “I had never had this opportunity in a workplace before,” says Jodee, who adds, “This focus on the value of self-learning really worked for me and was a good fit with my goals and aspirations.”

Another key concept within facilitator learning at FWD is being guided by the question, “Who knows something?” Jodee explains, “Some of the first questions we ask of the people we are supporting are: Who knows something that is helpful? Who knows a resource? We are building inter-dependence.” Aviva found this idea inspiring. “The ‘who’ question shapes my role as a facilitator,” she notes, “We are supporting people to think in new ways, to consider who they can connect with to

build a meaningful life. I want something to happen for the person, but my role is to enable people to think about and act on who in your community, who in your life can be helpful.”

FWD staff meet monthly for Network Meetings, another powerful approach to learning. The staff meetings cover different topics, based on learning goals that staff set as a group. Facilitators take turns leading the meetings with a different topic each time. Topics have included employment, relationships, grief, deep listening, and self-care. Often guest speakers are invited to do a presentation or the facilitators themselves share resources. The Network Meetings offer a way for facilitators to share their strengths and areas of experience with one another. They reinforce the culture of shared learning – that each one of us is both a learner and a teacher.

FWD has sponsored several learning forums designed to bring people together to learn and connect with one another. The workshops tend to focus on what families say is important to them – issues like relationships, support circles, and planning for the future. FWD staff note that these events help families to see things differently. As one example, Jodee says “We do a workshop on the nature of independent facilitation. Naming it as a process, as a culture, as an organization, can be huge. People make better use of their facilitator once they have more awareness. They realize that this role has huge potential for their son or daughter.”

Facilitators notice that group gatherings can be very confirming for families. “Some people find relief, and realize ‘I am not in this alone,’” says Aviva. Facilitators also note that learning forums and group conversations are a gentle way to challenge people to think about things differently. Aviva summarizes this learning. “Some people come and leave with more knowledge, others come and leave with a connection with another family, and others leave with a different energy, and sometimes they leave with a different way of thinking about themselves and their family.”

In addition to hosting learning forums, FWD contributes to learning at a broader community level. Jodee, for example, writes a newspaper column called *Community Connections*. “The columns are a chance for people to think about how they might support someone,” explains Jodee. In every column she writes, Jodee stresses what the person taught her. One story was about a man who had much gratitude and Jodee framed it by inviting people to appreciate what they have. This

is community awareness, which has a kind of ripple effect, supporting families, who in turn connect with the wider community.

People connected with FWD think carefully about how to sustain this culture of learning. There is a strong belief that the values that guide facilitation also build commitment to life-long learning. Self-determination is central to the work of facilitation. Jodee says, “One of the fundamental differences I have noticed is that there is permission to take time and space for people’s journey and their self-determination, over time. We do not rush people, and it is about creating the path with people and we also invite others into the journey.” The value of “community first” also keeps facilitators grounded and open to the “who” questions. Finally, the value of relationships is critical to this learning, whether with the person, their family, or with the wider community. As Jodee stresses, “Relationships are the core of this work.”

The mutual respect and shared contribution by facilitators within FWD creates a positive atmosphere and the opportunity for collaboration. Every member of the FWD team understands the importance of supporting each other to learn and grow. “How can I share what I am learning with you and how can you share what you are learning with me?” is a motto that facilitators live by.

This unique way of learning and working is not an easy fit for everyone. It takes time to adjust to this learning culture, but people gradually learn to let go of traditional management models. Jodee believes that “The self-learning at FWD is huge, because if we are not willing to let go of the traditional management approaches, how are we going to support a person and family to be creative and let go of the traditional systems that may be part of their lives?” Staff members at FWD believe that we need to live what we are hoping others will embrace.