

## CHAPTER 3



# Being Neutral



*Excerpt by Sam Killermann & Meg Bolger*  
Co-Creators of The Safe Zone Project



**Unlocking**  
*the*  
**MAGIC**  
*of*  
**Facilitation**

Unlocking the Magic of Facilitation:  
11 Key Concepts You Didn't Know You Didn't Know  
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# Being Neutral

*"You can't be neutral on a moving train."*

*- Howard Zinn*



One of the most amusing things in life is when people start a sentence "No offense, but..." You know that not only are they about to say something (usually horrifyingly) offensive, but they think the caveat "no offense" somehow balances it back out to neutral. Or, as one of our favorite professors in grad school used to joke, when people say a terrible thing about another person, but add on the phrase "...bless their heart."

As facilitators, we often feel pressure to be seen as a neu-



tral party in the room. In fact, neutrality is so idealized that we have about a dozen different phrases we deploy to ensure our neutral stance. To name a few, we have “objectively speaking,” “most people would say,” “not to pick sides,” and “just playing the devil’s advocate here” (often used when we want to masquerade as neutral, but still argue what we truly believe). We’re concerned that if we are perceived as bringing our own biases into an educational setting, others will question the validity of what we have to say, or discredit it completely, chalking it up to an “of course you’d say that, you’re [...]”-type prejudice.

Attempting to be neutral as a facilitator is about as possible as starting a sentence with “No offense, but...” and not offending anyone. We want to suggest that attempting neutrality isn’t just unrealistic, it’s unhelpful. Instead of expending energy on being perceived as neutral, you’re better off (and your participants are better off) naming and working with the biases present—the biases we all have, and the societal pressures at large that are shaping the conversations in the room.

## NEUTRALITY ISN’T NEUTRAL

Part of what is so appealing about “neutral” is the thought of some absolute truth, an unquestionable right or wrong. However, most of what we think of as neutral is really quite subjective, and generally just a majority opinion being masked as objective fact. First, let’s ensure we’re working from the same definition of neutral:

**Neutral:** absence of decided views, expression, or strong feeling (Google).

Let’s take the most neutral, least subjective truth we can

muster, and break down what we're talking about when we say neutrality isn't neutral:

$$2 + 2 = 4.$$

No question that four being the sum of two and two is neutral, right? Well, that depends. Without questioning the factuality of the statement above, consider the following thoughts:

- ★ Is everyone capable of determining that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , or is there a set of beliefs or teachings necessary for one to come to that conclusion?
- ★ Is everyone able to express why  $2 + 2 = 4$  in the same way, or with the same clarity?
- ★ Will the statement  $2 + 2 = 4$  evoke the same feelings in everyone?

The symbols themselves are Hindu-Arabic, which are relatively widespread, and therefore may be thought of as neutral; but, as Sam learned when he was backpacking through Egypt and Jordan, in most of the shops he visited,  $2 + 2 = ٤$  (the original Arabic character for 4 looks surprisingly like a reversed Hindu-Arabic 3), which was confusing at first, to say the least. Even when folks understand the symbols of 2 and 4 the same way, asking several to express why  $2 + 2 = 4$  will likely get you several answers (from “because it does” to “ugh... I don't *do* math”), which brings us to the last point: math, though “objective” (“not influenced by personal feelings” [Google]), has a particularly subjective effect on people (it influences lots of personal feelings).

With those thoughts in mind, you might realize that the

answers to the above three bulleted questions are all “No.” Does that mean that sum of two and two is not 4? Nope. It just means that even this “objective” case is not entirely neutral: it’s not absent of decided views, expression, or strong feeling.

Now, considering the type of content you will be facilitating learning on, it probably won’t strike you as too radical an idea to accept the following: achieving neutrality as a facilitator is impossible.

But that’s okay.

## BEING OPEN & HONEST, INSTEAD OF BEING “NEUTRAL”

As we’ve discussed above, neutrality isn’t an achievable goal, and even if it were, we don’t think it would be the one we’d want to aim for. But just because neutrality isn’t possible, it doesn’t mean you can’t achieve some of the goals that neutrality espouses.

Being “neutral” (scare quotes intended) is often one of two things: (1) a person intentionally trying to present a space as open-minded and free of judgment; or (2) a person ignoring their own biases and dominant cultural biases and presenting them as objective. The latter is pernicious, and too prickly for us to get into in this book<sup>1</sup>. And we hope to show you that your best bet in accomplishing the first is, as counterintuitive as it seems, by being open and honest about

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<sup>1</sup> If it’s something you want to dive into, this book is part of a larger forthcoming book called *A Guide to Facilitation: The Social Justice Advocate’s Handbook*, which has an entire section dedicated to this. And in the meantime, we have some resources on the official website for this book that might tide you over.



how closed-minded and judgmental we actually are (bless our hearts).

By openly and honestly naming our biases, and the cultural biases we've unknowingly internalized or brought into a space, we are most able to create a space where folks are genuinely able to share their perspectives, explore difficult subjects, and be honest themselves. Here are a few tips:

- ★ **If something is politically charged, address the political charge.** Most social justice topics are couched in a lot of different belief systems: political, religious, personal, and beyond. Recognizing that there are multiple perspectives from which to view any one issue allows others to be more comfortable adding theirs to the conversation.
- ★ **Allow participants to share their opinions even when (especially when) they differ from yours.** You have biases about the material you're facilitating, and so do the participants in the room. Don't cut folks off simply because their biases are different from yours, and let them know they can share freely in the space, but...
- ★ **Recognize the goals of the learning space, and highlight them when highlighting your and others' biases.** If the goal of a training is to reduce racism, there is a clear bias against thoughts, ideas, and understandings that are rooted in or reinforce racism. Your bias as the facilitator, then, is an anti-racist one, and calling out racist bias (yours and others') is key to achieving the goals of the training.
- ★ **Be selective about when you share your opinion or experiences.** Your opinion, will often create a climate where the "neutral" is similar to you, disproportionate to other people's sharing. Know your voice carries this

weight every time you decide to weigh in.

Creating a space where people can share differing opinions, and where the judgment of others and you as the facilitator won't impede that, is an admirable goal. It's one we celebrate and encourage. To do this, we do not need to present a facade of neutrality with our words, but use actions to level the playing field. In the next few chapters, we will provide you with a bunch of tools that do just that. *And no offense, but you're gonna need 'em.*



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