

CHAPTER 5



Both/And

>

Or/But



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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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Both/And > Or/But

*“That’s what careless words do.
They make people love you a little less.”*

- Arundhati Roy

Let’s consider two situations. In both, someone is facilitating a training with a group, and their goal is to help the group understand humanity’s effect on global climate change. One participant is struggling with the material. For this example, let’s do our best to empathize with that participant.

In the first situation, the participant in the training who is struggling pushes back. They say, “I don’t understand how you can think the planet is warming. We just had a terrible

blizzard last week.” The facilitator, confident that the material being covered is factually true, sensitively responds, “I appreciate you sharing your perspective. A lot of people share that concern, but extreme weather is actually a symptom of climate change.”

Now consider an alternative situation, where everything is the same, except for one word being changed: the facilitator responds, “I appreciate you sharing your perspective. A lot of people share that concern, **and** extreme weather is actually a symptom of climate change.”

You may have already had a feeling in your gut in response to that simple word change: the feeling of “and” and the feeling of “but” can be dramatically different. If you felt it, then your gut has already taught you what this chapter is all about. If the message didn’t make it to your gut just yet, no worries—we’ll do our best to work our way from your head down.

AND VS. BUT: UNPACKING THE DIFFERENCE

“And” and “But” serve similar functions grammatically. And, generally speaking, we can exchange one for the other without noticing much of a difference in meaning. But when disagreeing with someone, the difference between “and” and “but” grows to a canyon.

Whenever someone makes a statement, connecting your response to theirs with “and” builds on what they said; connecting your response to theirs with “but” negates what they said. “And” recognizes their truth, and adds yours on top of or alongside it; “But” negates their truth, and replaces it with yours.

“Meg is wonderful, *but* she smells bad.” Meg might be wonderful, but that is diminished by the fact that she smells bad. “Meg is wonderful, *and* she smells bad.” In this sentence, Meg’s wonderfulness isn’t diminished by her odor—heck, it might even be part of her charm (“Meg is so busy being wonderful she ain’t got *time* to shower—I respect that.”). What we’re doing with the “And” is allowing these two ideas to have their own merit, to exist alongside one another, instead of putting them on opposite ends of an ideological tug of war (the classic hot-button controversy of “wonderful” vs. “smell bad” you’re always hearing about on cable news).

MANIFESTING POLAR BEARS

Facilitation requires so much attention to so many competing things, it can be easy for us to accidentally create a throwdown we had no intention of throwing down. Sometimes, something as small as saying “But” when you could have said “And” will trigger a fight or flight reflex in a participant, where you turn them into a hyper-protective mama bear whose cub is her idea. We’ll call this manifesting polar bears.

If you want to steer clear of polar bears, your best bet is to avoid poles. We are really good at internalizing two ideas as competing, polar opposites, when often they’re better understood as two distinct ideas, and not actually in competition at all.

Do your best to be intentional about which ideas, or what material, you’re discussing are actually polar opposites, and which can happily coexist.

BUT/OR CREATE A HUNGER GAMES OF IDEAS

If there really is one absolute truth--a winning idea that needs to emerge as victorious--creating dichotomies and forcing people to choose one concept over another is necessary. Responding to participants' statements with “but” and “or” are great ways to create that competition.

Sometimes allowing for multiple perspectives won't help. It may create more confusion than clarity, or the ambiguity is occasionally too difficult for participants to hold, and without anything concrete to anchor them, all the learning drops out. We understand this. We simply encourage you to pick your ideological battle royales.

“What you just said might be true, or everything we know might be a lie and our universe is really a simulation being run by some super-computer of an advanced civilization.”

AND/BOTH CREATE A SANDBOX WHERE EVERYONE CAN PLAY

One of the best things about facilitation is bringing learning out of a bunch of individuals, and enabling them to share what they know with one another. Most ideas can play nicely with other ideas if we allow them to.

When it's clear that the learning being shared can add to the learning you're hoping to accomplish as a facilitator, we encourage you to “And” relentlessly. If you notice a false dichotomy that participants are struggling with, a carefully placed “both” can keep them from flinging sand in one another's eyes.

*“Folks, may I suggest something? Perhaps the leaders of the advanced civilization controlling our universe are **both** ‘a huge pile of jerks’ for taking away the dinosaurs **and** ‘benevolent*

all-healing gods' for giving us guacamole."

HOW BOTH/AND LOOKS IN THE MOMENT

Hopefully you don't need convincing that multiple truths and realities exist—about any and every concept—even when they seem to contradict each other. And maybe the above helped you recognize the power you have to create space for these multiple realities, or to demolish them, all with your choice of conjunction¹. Having the ability to identify the “*But*” statements that can be “*And*” statements is an important skill. As soon as you're comfortable with that distinction, you can move into choosing your language intentionally, and, in turn, helping participants understand that multiple truths and realities can exist together. Here are a few things to think about that might help you do just that.

YOUR REALITY BEING TRUE DOESN'T MEAN MY REALITY ISN'T

It's easy for us to fall into the trap of believing that our truth is dependent upon it being universally true. Sam is constantly arguing that the entirety of *The Matrix* trilogy has merit, and has a hard time believing that when literally every person he talks to thinks the latter two films are worthless. He can be right (i.e., all three films can add worth to his life), and everyone else can be right (i.e., the second two movies are, to them, a festering waste of film, money, time, and Keanu Reeves). Both parties are right, and Sam is delusional.

¹ *Conjunction Junction, what's your function? I've got two real choices, and one will get me far: Protect participants' realities, or destroy and leave them scarred.*

We see this come up again and again in facilitation: if my reality is this way then your reality can't be that way. "If I am experiencing what you said as problematic, and you didn't, we can't both be right." Instead of discussing the core of the issue, we talk about who is "really right" as if there is an absolute reality we are close to, and need to find. The Both/And concept allows us to stop having that conversation and move into having the next phase of the conversation, which is "tell me about your reality, and then I can tell you about mine." This is particularly important with social justice concepts, when you're attempting to affirm many different types of experiences and understandings of self, some of which are less part of the dominant narrative than others.

AND MY REALITY BEING TRUE DOESN'T MEAN IT'S
TRUE FOR YOU

At some point, far too late into his adult life, Sam realized that he can appreciate all three *Matrix* films, while everyone else hates them. In fact, he now celebrates that he might be the only person in the world who likes all three films ("More metal plug-shaped Keanu Reeve nipples for me.").

Creating space for Both/And means recognizing that disagreeing is okay, healthy, even desirable, and can lead to learning for everyone. As a facilitator, your first hurdle is getting over your own But/Or thinking when it comes to something a participant says. Your second hurdle (often higher, more wibbly-wobbly, and likely to send you sprawling) is helping participants get over their But/Or thinking in response to what other participants say.

A phrase we use, that you are welcome to think of as the penicillin of facilitator interjections, is "Thanks for sharing your perspective. It's always nice to see how many different

perspectives people have about this.” Then, when another participant shares a contradicting or directly retaliatory view, you can use it again. “And thanks for sharing *your* perspective! It’s always nice to see how many different perspectives people have about this.” And you can rinse and repeat until your participants evolve into an anti-confrontational resistant superbug.

Enabling participants to have coexisting—instead of competing—unique perspectives amongst one another is as important as recognizing when their perspective and your perspective can coexist.

IMPORTANT BOTH/AND CONCEPTS

There are innumerable situations in which Both/And will come in handy. Instead, we’re going to highlight a few of the most easy-to-But/Or concepts we can think of, and all of them come from a fountain of perpetual controversy: the perspective, process, and goal that is social justice. It is our hope that in seeing how these highly divisive concepts are unified, you’ll be able to extrapolate this out to just about any situation you might experience in your facilitation.

YOU CAN BE BOTH PRIVILEGED AND OPPRESSED

We often talk about privilege and oppression as if they were the two positions of a light switch: you can either be oppressed, or privileged—no in between, no other options. This, like all Both/And-able concepts that are But/Or-ed, creates unnecessary conflict, demolishes nuance, and prevents understanding and empathy. Every person has many identities, and experiences those identities in unique ways, depending on location, time, and the rest of who they are.

Not only can a single person experience both oppression *and* privilege, most of us do! Being able to accept and present that reality, being both privileged and oppressed, helps others see the complexity of both issues, and creates some wiggle room for a productive dialogue.

YOU CAN BE DOING GOOD (OR TRYING TO) AND
CAUSING HARM

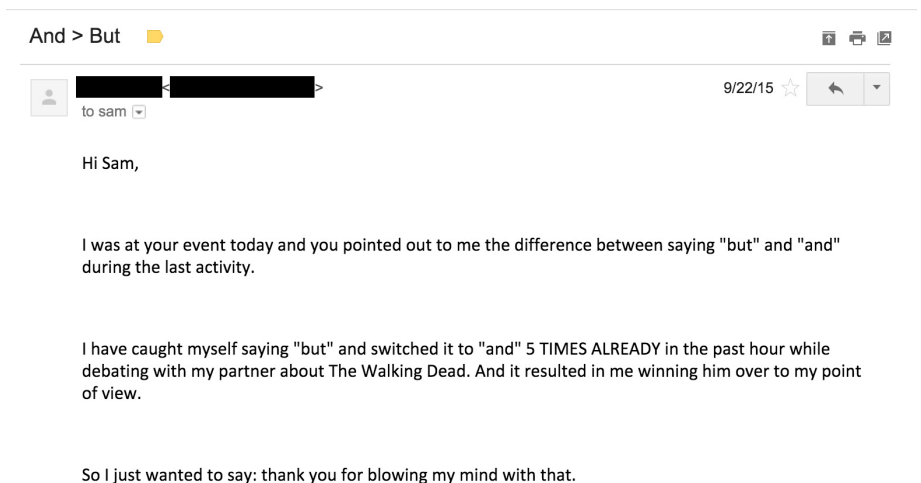
We often struggle when our intentions don't align with outcomes, and participants in a training will be the first to latch onto just that. As facilitators, it's easy to focus on the harm someone causes, and we might be able to enable more learning for everyone if we also acknowledge the good (whether manifested or intended). And we, as facilitators, often do the same thing. For example, if we are silencing, forgetting, or even purposefully excluding particular marginalized voices, perspectives, and identities from the conversation, this *is* doing harm (it's reinforcing the erasure and marginalization these perspectives experience in society), *and* it might be doing good (we might recognize that trying to talk about *everything all at once* will lead to confusion, and instead focus on accomplishing a small, specific win instead). Sam may be doing a great job facilitating a workshop about lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities and completely ignore (or not leave time to discuss) asexuality. Whether intentional or not, this may cause harm while simultaneously doing good: participants may have a vastly more comprehensive understanding of LGB identities but have no more understanding, empathy, or connection to asexual identities.

As facilitators, we have to make choices like this all the time. It happens when we decide what we are going to be discussing or not covering, what concepts we are prioritizing

and what concepts we just may not get to. These are difficult choices, and many of us are aware that we're doing some amount of harm (even if it's just in way of not doing good), *while* we're doing good. Keep this in mind, and use it as your source of empathy, when helping participants recognize they are often doing the same thing.

KEEPING YOUR BUT OUT OF CONVERSATIONS

This concept can be difficult to unsee now that you've seen it—like many others in the book (we hope!). It undermines a foundational component of our communication that we may not have realized we were communicating. You might, for a short while, find yourself stumbling over basic sentences in conversations with others (e.g., Someone asks “How are you?” and you reply “I’m well, but today—oh no. Is that an and? Hm... ‘and’ today...? Hold on a sec! Can I try again?”), to the utter *confusion* of those others. In fact, it's not uncommon for us to get an email from someone we trained, days or weeks after the training, like the following email Sam received:



We understand. This concept had—and has—a similar effect on us.

You might also find yourself glowing with pride when you pepper in an “and” where previously you would have unwittingly inserted your “but.” We’re guilty here, too.

We’re not sure which one leads to more social awkwardness: the cursing yourself for saying “but,” or the “my kid is going to Harvard” pride when you nail the “and.” What we can say for sure is that both are likely to lead the other person in the conversation to think you’ve had way too much caffeine.

This technique is something that will take time to utilize without awkwardness, *and* that’s okay! Curse yourself, pat yourself on the back, do neither or both, and keep reading. Now that you’ve stumbled upon the ground-shaking glory that is “and is greater than but,” you’re ready for something even more powerful: the “Yes, And...” rule.



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