

Happy the facilitator and the group when the facilitator navigates this pathway with skill and grace.

Another challenge which emerges more frequently is that of the facilitator's attachment to processes and methods that are comfortable and favored by the facilitator, or using the group to practice new processes learnt and using the group event as an opportunity to demonstrate a new skill or practice. Let's face it – we have our comfort zones and a human tendency to work within our comfort zones.

Happy the facilitator and the group when the facilitator is focused on putting the needs of the group first before her own inclinations to play safe within her comfort zone.

What does *Masterchef: The Professionals* have to do with this?

For those who have not followed the reality series *Masterchef: The Professionals*, this is a contest to discover the top professional chef amongst the competitors who are all working chefs either in restaurants or hotels, cruise ships, pubs or personal chefs. Like all professionals, these chefs have found a place where they are comfortable in their practice and have developed their skill sets to suit the needs of their regular clientele. They are taking a risk indeed to enter a contest where their skills will be challenged and tested against that of their peers from various fields. To add to the challenge, the classically trained chef judges set a skills test which is usually based on some French classic cuisine which may have been long forgotten by some or not even learnt by those who developed their practice without the classical training.

As I watched these professional chefs battle through the contest and struggle to keep their composure in the face of no-holds barred judging – I realized that the lessons they were learning – were also lessons that are relevant to me in my professional practice.

The Dreaded Skills Test

The first challenge is a skills test is designed to stretch the contestant's basics against a framework of Western culinary traditions – making sauces, preparing dishes developed in French culinary tradition, etc. The chef contestants who were not classically trained in French cuisine – were doomed to make a mess of it. Yet knowing this, contestants took the bait and signed on – risking their professional reputations for that chance at the title "Professional *Masterchef*". I wondered at their gumption. And I learned from their handling of failure and embarrassment. Basically, grab the opportunity to make your mark, draw a line after a disaster, pick yourself up, get focused and give your best in the next challenge.

More than that, some discerning individuals admitted that the nerves got the better of them – and they had known what to do – but did not get it done as they were rattled by the pressure of being observed and evaluated as they worked. The rueful faces and disappointed looks indicated

a sense of dissatisfaction with themselves – and a sense of resolution to do better with the next challenge. For me, it echoed those times when a session did not meet the expected outcomes due to some unanticipated development – times when I realized I could have done better for the group, if things had been different. And, the realization that what transpired – was the best that could have been given the circumstances.

On the question of skills, I am reminded that there is no short cut to skill development – and years of practice does not translate to great skill automatically. As a professional, I am called to stay relevant in my practice, continually learning and exploring both the tradition and the evolution of facilitation – so that I do not lose the intrinsic core of facilitation which is assisting groups to their expected outcomes, whilst learning to layer the various models, approaches and technology developed over the years, that may contribute to developing an effective process.

The Signature Dish

This is when the chef gets an opportunity to do what they do best – and showcase their skills. Simple as it sounds, only 3 make it to the final round. More than a few contestants fault by doing too much. Viewing the challenge as an opportunity to show off their breadth of skills and trying to redeem themselves from a bad performance in the skills test, contestants produced plates that were over-done, pretentious and lacking in finesse. The challenge was pressure and time.

As a professional facilitator, often I am also faced with the challenge of pressure and time. Groups often expect much to be done in the least amount of time possible; and, I am challenged to curate my resources and choose the most appropriate process that will bring the best out of the group – and no more. At times, I face a similar temptation to showcase my skills, or, pick a favorite process for which I have a particular strength, and stay in my comfort zone, rather than study the group well and devise a process that meets their needs. Watching the chefs struggle to produce a fine dish with an economy of frills, I am reminded again that less is more – and the need to be focused rather than frantic about staying with a method; to remember always that each group would have its own journey.

The best chefs, the winners, develop a way to communicate with their ingredients, almost instinctively deciding on the best possible ways to present their food such that the produce speak for themselves. The best chefs facilitate fine food production, as it were.

As a facilitator, it would be a signature event when the group comes to a resolution of their question – and realise that the answer was theirs to formulate, it had only to be revealed through dialogue and collaboration. The facilitator's role of navigator of the process would then be fully realized.

Being Grounded in Order to Take Flight

Among the many contestants in Professional Masterchef, let me share 3 stories. The Chef judges for the show are Monica Galleti and Marcus Wareing who are both celebrity chefs and restaurateurs. Both classically trained with years of experience in top restaurants, they set the standards high. The diverse contestants are young chefs in their twenties and thirties of various ethnic origins, working in the UK. They are drawn to the contest as a means of developing their skills, profile and exposure. Occasionally, some contestants may be older, in their forties - taking an opportunity to challenge themselves and open new pathways.

In the latest series, Season 12, Malin, aged 36 is a head chef who grew up in Sri Lanka and learned the use of spices from his mother. Now working in a gastropub in Pembrokeshire UK, he demonstrated a fine ability to display his particular style incorporating Sri Lankan spices in his signature dish. The judges were intrigued by his style, but, working on the boundaries of Asian and Western cuisine proved risky for him and he did not make it to the final round. He was disappointed but undaunted – accepting the experience as part of his development.

Andrew, aged 33, is a Royal Navy chef who came to Masterchef Professional with the intention of stretching himself and his capabilities. He wanted to prove that a Navy chef could do more than hearty servings for the crew and compete at the professional level. His crowning dish was revealed when he drew from his personal history and used his Thai wife's recipe for Tom Yam, re-inventing it to become a delicate consommé soup with trimmings.

In Season 10, Louisa, a 22-year-old chef in a restaurant was determined to make it to the finals and win the event. Though only 22 years old, she had technical abilities that put her ahead of many – and her organised work methods and focus made her a tough competitor. Season 10 saw a final round with 3 young chefs in their early 20s, all producing great dishes and high levels of skill. They were fearless, original and determined. The judges were faced with a task of choosing from the best. Craig Johnston, the Champion Masterchef Professional won his place because he had moved beyond skill and perfect execution and taken his cuisine to a different level, incorporating what he had learnt from his exposure in the Masterchef journey, and producing dishes that left the judges speechless due to their originality and inspiration.

These chefs provide a window into the diversity of the contestants and their different levels of challenges faced. Each of them responded to challenges differently, depending on their character, training and openness to committing to producing a dish according to the specifications. Malin showed a pride in his origins and a determination to develop a style incorporating the cuisine of Sri Lanka and Europe. He was prepared to receive both positive and negative feedback, realizing that not everyone would appreciate this fusion style. Andrew was determined to prove a point, and keen to demonstrate his flexibility of style – he did his best when he searched within himself to find an authentic expression of his experience of diversity. Louisa was eager to show off her technical skills and was often pressed for time as she

incorporated many elements in her dishes – sometimes losing focus. Over the course of the competition, she learnt to do less, with more intent and purpose, which made her a finalist in Season 10.

Each chef had his or her individual journey, and a different experience of becoming a chef. Each wanted to become a leading chef and excel in their chosen profession. Entering the competition put their skills and professionalism on display – which took great personal courage. I learnt the most from the reflections of the individuals who had failed specific challenges and, as a result were dropped from the group. It was significant for me that each of those who were dropped, attributed the result to their own lack of focus or the nature of the game. No blame, no excuses. Also, it was evident that for each individual, there was a deeper self-awareness.

It seemed that whether a chef stayed the course until the final or not – there was great opportunity for learning and growth, both as a chef and as a professional.

Gleanings & Alchemy

Studying what makes a chef a professional has helped me to see what would make me a better professional facilitator. More than collecting a variety of skills and methods under my belt, the mark of the professional is to be able to select the right resources to use in different groups for specific purposes. This practice of inner curation of abilities and processes to select what fits best is very much an internal discipline which builds on the core competency of self-development and integrity. It requires a full awareness of the group's needs and the individual facilitator's capability and flexibility. As I enter my second decade as a facilitator, this reminder convinces me that the journey is far from over. With every group and situation, there is an invitation to go deeper within to find the key to what works well for the group and what will be the best practice for myself as the facilitator. As I respond to this, my world view expands broader and deeper and I am continually being surprised by insights and *Aha* moments.

Both the chef and the facilitator need to foster and nurture a relationship with ingredients and group respectively. Though the chef's ingredients may not speak vocally, they do interact with each other and become more than a sum of their parts. The talent of the chef in bringing these separate ingredients into a cohesive dish decides who becomes a Champion Professional Masterchef.

Facilitators work with groups that are dynamic and interactive and vocal about their expectations. In fact, the more vocal the group, the greater the chance of the facilitator connecting with their expectations and working with them to achieve their desired outcomes. Sometimes, with certain groups, there is a need to evoke more vocal contributions, especially when individuals may be harbouring varied agenda or opinions and hesitate to surface them. This is a real challenge and the facilitator must be able to sense when and if there is permission to go beyond what is comfortable for the individual and the group. Very much like the chef, the

facilitator purposefully works to bring the group to a cohesive whole as intended by the stakeholders.

There is some degree of alchemy in the work of both the chef and the facilitator – at their best, both work in the realms of reality and mystery. Mastering the science of it enables them to function at a high level, but it is in the practice of the art of it, that their efforts are memorable and have significance in the lives of all whom they encounter.

These thoughts capture my attention and impact my development goals in my facilitator journey. I am called to focus deeply and work on this alchemy as I facilitate groups in communities and corporations.

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