

Julia Winston:

Take a look around. You'll notice them everywhere. Facilitators, people who guide other people, create connection and make tough things easier. This is Facilitator Forum, where we meet a magical mix of people who offer us insights and inspiration through the stories of their work in the world. I'm your host, Julia Winston. Welcome.

Hey there, everybody. My name is Julia Winston and I am absolutely delighted that you've joined me for the first ever episode of Facilitator Forum. Today I just want to give you a little background about who I am and why I started this podcast. It's pretty much context setting with a little bit of storytelling. First allow me to introduce myself. I'm a native Austinite, living in Austin, Texas. I'm a daughter, a friend, a sister, dog mom to an Australian shepherd puppy named Frieda. I'm a disco dancing, book loving, journal writing, sometimes cooking, often hiking, adventure loving human being.

When it comes to work, I would call myself an entrepreneur with a coaching and consulting business. Above all else, I'm a facilitator. I help leaders and companies bring more human connection to the workplace. That's my mission. I've come to know a lot of awesome facilitators throughout the course of my work. People who guide businesses through transformative experiences to grow, change and evolve in different ways. The truth is, the more appreciation I've gained for the art and science of facilitation, the more I've come to understand that facilitation is not actually limited to a business context. I see powerful facilitators everywhere.

To facilitate means to make an action or process easier. This is literally the definition of to facilitate. I see facilitators as people who guide other people through change, through evolution, tough times, transitions, big moments, everyday moments, in service to more ease. Let me give you a few examples. My friend Julie is a chef. She loves to nourish people. She hates to waste food. She even goes so far as to take food that's about to go to waste from fancy grocery stores and other organizations that she's connected with and she delivers them to food pantries and to shelters.

This is called food rescue. In fact, I've gotten involved as a volunteer with food rescue, because I think it's one of the most beautiful forms of facilitation. To make it easier for people to have access to food with food that's there anyways, and about to go to waste. I think of Julie, and myself, when I'm volunteering as food facilitators.

Another example is my sister, Molly, who is a postpartum doula. Molly works with families when they've just brought a new baby home and she works with them for the first few months of the baby's life. This is a really important, challenging time for families with new babies. She helps the families get settled in. She helps them care for the baby. She runs errands, takes care of things that need to happen around the house, consults them on how to help the baby sleep or changing diapers or anything and everything in between. Molly is a facilitator.

Another example is dog trainers. When I first got Frieda, it was COVID and I was alone. Suddenly I had a new puppy and she is really freaking smart and highly energetic. I did not know what to do with this pup. I watched YouTube videos, I read books and I learned a lot, but it wasn't until I started working with a trainer that I felt like there was a human being out there who was making my life easier by helping to guide me through this transition of bringing a dog into my life.

How was I supposed to relate to this animal? How could I show her who was boss while also being loving and playful? It's much more complicated than it sounds. If you have a puppy, you know what I'm talking about. Dog trainers are really rad facilitators.

As you can see, facilitation comes in many forms and facilitators come in many packages from many walks of life. I think we should celebrate this diversity. I started this podcast to go on a facilitator expedition. I'm excited to explore the many forms facilitation takes and to learn the stories of people

who facilitate. How did they become facilitators? What are they facilitating? And why does it matter? What are they learning about themselves and humanity through their work? What can we all learn through their unique paths as facilitators?

Okay, we've reached the storytelling portion of our podcast. I'm going to tell you the story of how I became a facilitator. It all started with my mom, Cathy. My mom ran a small business that created public health awareness campaigns to bring about healthy behavior change for cities and states. Think posters that show you how to wash your hands properly for 20 seconds. Think billboards that tell you where to go if you're being abused by your spouse.

My mom's company did the research that informed campaigns like this. The summer after my sophomore year of college, my mom hired me as an intern and trained me to facilitate focus groups. One of the first projects I worked on was a campaign to increase fruit and vegetable consumption in food deserts around the state of Texas. She taught me the facilitation basics, such as how to frame group meeting, how to acknowledge people by saying their names and making eye contact, ensuring everyone's voice is heard.

I'll never forget the day she set me loose to facilitate a focus group all on my own. I was so nervous. She was watching me through the two way glass at the facility as I led a group of 12 adolescent boys through a discussion about their relationship to fruits and vegetables. I followed her instructions and opened by acknowledging that everyone would remain anonymous, but that I would be recording the session so I could go back and listen to write the report.

I also like at heartedly acknowledged that there was two-way glass, which looked suspiciously like a mirror, by saying, if you're wondering if you're being watched, we are, but don't worry, it's just my mom. And she's watching me not you. I remember getting flustered when one kid dominated the conversation. I could feel my mother's eyes following my every move through the glass. I envisioned her pen moving across the legal pad as she took notes on my performance for later feedback. And she gave me feedback. She told me everything she thought I had done well. She gave me ideas for what I could do better.

I went on to facilitate many focus groups in partnership with my mother and I continued to improve my skills. The thing that was the hardest for me was making sure everyone's voice was heard. Inevitably, there was always someone who tried to dominate the conversation, but my mom taught me how to hear from all the voices around the table without making the person who had been dominating feel bad in any way. I watched as she beautifully masterfully facilitated groups.

I tried to emulate what I saw her do. As time went by, I started channeling, expanding and refining all the facilitation skills she taught me as I started guiding groups in a wide variety of activities and contexts. From teaching yoga classes. To hosting dinner parties, to leading team meetings for growing startups. Then, nearly 15 years later, when I found myself leading a team of corporate facilitators, it became clear to me that my real passion was not, in fact, leading teams, but guiding groups, being a facilitator.

There you have it. Now you know my origin story. But it's not like I knew I would grow up to become a facilitator. No, I wanted to be a geologist, then I wanted to be an opera singer, then Jane Goodall, so I could go play with the monkeys in the forest all day, and then for many years I wanted to be an actor. And the theater is where I picked up a lot of facilitation skills. My point is, you don't hear kids saying, "I want to be a facilitator when I grow up."

Who are my fellow facilitator peeps out there? What are you facilitating? And what's your origin story? This, my friends is where our expedition begins. Join me on this journey into the world of

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facilitation. Get ready for some awesome stories and conversations. Before we close out today, let me leave you with a possibility and a question. The possibility is that everyone is facilitating something.

We're all here to make something easier for someone, whether through our day jobs, the roles we play in our households or our friend groups, the volunteering we do out in our communities and all the other realms we play in every day. If that's true, what are you facilitating? Subscribe to this podcast and let's go exploring. I'll be releasing a new episode every other week. Over the next three episodes, I'll be interviewing three rockstar facilitators whose work centers around the cultivation of human connection.

I want to give a special shout out to the artists who helped me bring this podcast to life. Artwork created by Adam Rosendahl of Late Nite Art. All of the music in this podcast is original music written and performed by Gasoline Tequila, featuring Massimo Lusardi on guitar and Caleb Spaulding on percussion. Finally, I want to thank you for listening. I'll catch you next time.