

# Parallel Processes, Parallel Challenges, and Possible Ways Forward

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This article was originally written for the Focusing community during a time of significant conflict around leadership in that community, so there are many references to Focusing here. It also has relevance for many in the NVC community and perhaps other communities, as well.

Sorry about the long introduction; I believe that what follows will be worth it.

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## **Introduction – A Tale of Growth and Challenges**

Dear Friends and Focusing Colleagues,

It is the intention of this letter to contribute to offer some empathy and insight to the Focusing community at this juncture.

Empathy, for the challenges of what we are trying to accomplish as a community, and towards our personal and collective distress.

Insight, into some of the highly complex territory that we are navigating together in our endeavors.

It is my hope that this letter may be able to offer some of that compassionate holding to the community and its leadership during this transition period. As we know, offering empathic attention to bodily held situations can allow life forward movement in their own right way.

Offering insights can also contribute. The more comprehensively we can sense the territory that we are living into, the more effectively we can work together and move forward, minimizing the sense of stuckness that triggers frustration and blame, and decreases trust and synergy.

I would like to begin by appreciating the long and intense hours spent by present and past staff, and Board members, of TFI as they work hard and openheartedly to support the spread of Focusing by its membership into the world.

A number of list members have stepped forward and offered suggestions as well – democratic process, an entity to support trainers, using more Focusing within organizational process, and more...

A few months ago, I experienced something that really shifted my understanding of the challenges that we are facing. I was assisting Rosa Zubizarreta as she led a 3-day group facilitation workshop in November.

Within the group, at least 10 of the 14 participants practiced NVC, including several certified NVC trainers. At least 4 of us knew Focusing (two Trainers, one Coordinator, and myself.)

One of the topics chosen by the group members to explore was **“Challenges within the NVC community.”**

For those of us who were Focusers, we had a startling realization - **we could not help but notice how similar the themes and challenges in both communities were: “This could have been about the Focusing community!”**

Of course, each practice community has its own unique challenges. Yet, having two organizations with parallel issues can give us a unique and larger perspective on the challenges each faces.

And, yet, in spite of great people, wonderful intentions, and hard work, there have been significant difficulties in both the NVC and the Focusing communities.

For some time now, I've been concerned about the disparity between the gentle, accepting, allowing practice of Focusing, and the painful situations that can occur within the Focusing community.

These can be difficult and embarrassing topics to discuss openly. Some have mentioned “sugarcoating” to describe how certain organizational matters are often not talked about with openness.

On the other hand, we know that "free-for-alls" on difficult issues can be destructive. So I very much appreciate the care and skill that is happening with these discussions.

Historically, much of the discussion around the Focusing community and its leadership tends to congregate in these three areas:

- the importance of effective organizational leadership.
- living our values organizationally
- accountability and transparency as key values.

What was so surprising to me was that, as we continued the DF process beyond the initial stories of frustration, **we found ourselves surprised to discover larger patterns and issues** – ones that we had not been aware of initially.

We began to have a deeper appreciation of the vastness of our endeavor, and a sense of a greater holding, a greater compassion for all of us engaged in this work.....

As we discovered how many of these issues are larger than any individual person or organization, it can be easier for us to all face forward and work together as a community to address them.

The converse is also true. **Without taking these additional factors into account , certain core problems are likely to persist in spite of new leadership, regardless of their good intentions, hard work, and personal integrity.** It would be sad to have such hard work not bear good fruit.

As I participated in those three days of facilitated conversation in November, I was inspired by some parallels with the origins of the Women's Movement (which I believe started when several women came together to share some of their experiences of frustration and distress in their lives.) As they saw the parallel patterns of distress among themselves, it became clear that **their deep personal feelings were arising in response to larger systemic issues** in gender roles and cultural norms. Once they turned their eyes to examining the culture, their energies found new and strategic direction, and the world has never been the same since.

In this case, I felt as if I was hearing the outer voices of NVC community experience, and holding it along with the inner voices from Focusing community experiences – each gathering around a table sharing their frustrations, and coming up with more than we had expected.

## **Intentions and Overview**

This paper is intended to increase our awareness of the beauties, the challenges, and pitfalls that have evolved as good people attempt to bring deep listening/emergence-based practices into our world.

It also may be a good starting point for facilitated discussions within the community.

I would like to thank all of the participants at the Voluntown, CT workshop in Dynamic Facilitation for their 7+ hours of engaged conversation which generated these insights and understandings. At the same time, I do not claim to represent anyone else's position here; what follows is a combination of my own insights, along with my own interpretations of what others said.

In addition to the skills and competence of those in organizational roles , there are numerous other factors at play, including:

- vulnerabilities of being human,
- vulnerabilities of our practices themselves,
- challenges in creating effective group processes,
- and more:

This is an overview of some relevant themes. A second paper with more details about each of these areas will (hopefully) be available within a week or so:

## **1. We are part of a long evolutionary process, carrying our history with us**

We have at least 10,000 years of conditioning in our relationship to authority, power, and each other. Our brains include reptilian and mammalian circuitry.

Many of us who are attracted to humanistic growth practices have a conscious intention to live a life more aligned with our higher values, and to make the world a better place.

And, most of us carry wounds that we seek to heal by engaging in the process and the community.

In all cases, the primitive survival patterns are present in each of us. As someone said *“We in NVC are a bunch of jackals trying to become giraffes.”* That patterning which we seek to expand beyond can be activated quite easily.

So, this is whom we have to work with. The new ways of interacting, and our new communities that we create, will have to deal with both our growing new selves, and our older easily-triggered selves.

This is a huge cultural issue and evolutionary challenge.

How do we evolve forms of working together where the leadership does not reside in just one person or in rigid guidelines that stifle individual passion, but instead in living understandings and empowering forms of interaction that provide clear orientation, effective guidance, accountability, and support for all?

## **2. “Inevitable hypocrisy” when learning new ways of being is unavoidable and challenges group trust**

When learning something new, **we** are often identified with our conscious intention, with how often we notice an old pattern and then consciously choose the new way.

**Others**, seeing our behavior, **notice how often we continue acting from our old dysfunctional patterns**. Inner and outer experiences appear very different.

It can be natural to consider those who state one thing and behave quite differently to be ‘hypocrites’, rather than understanding that, in some situations, this is a natural stage in the learning curve as we live into new ways of being.

If this is not surfaced as an inevitable stage in learning, it can lead to shame of the one trying to change, and decreased trust of them by others.

### **3. It is natural to run into difficulties when expanding a process to new areas.**

Focusing and NVC bring incredible value to people. Each is a beautiful and powerful way of offering mindful attention to one another and to our own experience.

In some ways, we might consider them to be very powerful and useful “apps”.

The more we find Focusing, NVC, etc useful, the more we apply it to additional realms, as it grows beyond its original scope. This is how innovation and application occurs. As we become more proficient and have success with the process, we find ourselves increasing our expectations and range for what each process can do and in what situations it can be applied.

Eventually we stretch it too far. There are some places where it does not work so well, and that may be due to inherent design elements, rather than our lack of skill with it. This is how we learn the limits of our process, its useful range of application.

It may help to realize that these great “apps” of Focusing, NVC, and many other processes do not have a wide enough base to be complete operating systems for all of one’s life. [Traditional religious systems, which were intended as complete operating systems, have many more layers and complexity of scope... and even so, may still be incomplete.]

Life is just not that simple. Each app is more like an asana in yoga – each “posture” allows something to occur, but there is no single asana for everything.

It is natural to want to bring more NVC or Focusing for business meetings of their respective organizations. And, this can be an area where the original process does not work so well. Without realizing its limitations, there can be a great deal of shame at the “failure” of the process or of the person leading it, based on some unexamined assumption that “it should work”.

## 4. Every process has its own particular strengths and vulnerabilities

This is related to #3 above.

Both Focusing and NVC have aspects that make them very effective for certain situations, while also limiting their effectiveness in other situations. Without acknowledging these limitations, breakdowns are inevitable.. If the process is perfect, then blame goes to self or others when things break down.

Rarely do people who stay in the practice community assign some of the responsibility for dysfunction to the limits of the practice – while those who do tend to leave that practice community.

Two major shifts in context that often go unrecognized occur when using Focusing:

- **in formal workgroups,**
- **in hierarchies** (managers and employees,etc)

In situations of interpersonal conflict within the community, we often find that the home processes (NVC, Focusing) are either not being employed, or, even when they are being employed, may not be sufficient on their own for helping resolve the distress.

There can be very good reasons for this!

When we take Focusing out of a peer-based or therapy support setting, and into a workplace with employees, directors, and decision-making about living and working together, there is a HUGE increase in personal vulnerability and shared content. The profound influence that this has on the Focusing process is greatly underestimated and rarely considered ahead of time.

The ineffectiveness of the core process in the business arena can lead to frustration and ongoing difficulties, especially if we continue to try to use it in its original forms without realizing that it may not be comprehensive enough on its own to help us achieve our goals.

Hopefully we can learn from our experiences and adapt in novel ways. We might learn even more quickly if we shared our failures as much as our successes. We would need invitations and safe places for this to happen.

[Here is one about Focusing: [Several limitations and potential pitfalls in using the Focusing process](#). See if any of them resonate with you, and feel free to add to this list so that we can debug our “app” with more integrity.]

## **5. Family dynamics and attachment dynamics have powerful influences in groups and communities.**

Those of us drawn to personal growth practices and communities do so because we have needs; participating in the practice and community is an attempt to get our needs met.

There are natural human processes (such as attachment, projecting goodness onto teachers and leaders, seeking to get our needs met through attachment figures) that can lead to challenges in communities. Many personal issues can be expected to arise and be acted out in these settings.

It is easy to hope that, if everyone were treated equally, we could avoid the problems of hierarchy and power over. However, the instinctual processes of attachment and transference dynamics are still present, just operating in different ways.

**We cannot just wish away these dynamics, nor legislate them away with an organizational charter or a statement of intention to all be equal, any more than we can wish away gravity.**

When wanting to create ‘leaderless groups’ and ‘democratic relationships’, it would be wise to pay special attention to attachment dynamics. They can be pushed into the shadows, harder to identify, their existence often denied- but still present and operational.

More on how this creates a subtle yet very knotty kind of problem can be found in a future paper.

## **6. Projection of our golden shadow onto leadership creates challenges**

We often project our own disowned goodness and beauty onto leaders.

Ideally, they help us reclaim it back, empowering us. But, that does not always happen so purely.

When something doesn't sit right with us, we often find it incredibly easy to believe that leadership must be right, and there must be something wrong with us.

Hmm, isn't that familiar? "*There must be something wrong with me*" sounds like the voice of shame. Is it any surprise that we humans carry some with us?

In peer-based practices and relationships like Focusing Partnership and Empathy Buddies, we often do not have the opportunity of directly encountering our authority issues. We can forget that we have them, as we are creating a world where we wish to minimize that power differential.

But in relationship to leadership, out they come.

In this context, we may find it easier to believe our projections and doubt ourselves rather than leadership. And, if leadership is avoiding their own shame and encourages a reverence of themselves by the community, it may be hard for them to acknowledge their limitations and mistakes.

All of this makes it harder for us to criticize, or for leadership to welcome criticism.

## **7. Not enough support is almost inevitable, and why that is so**

There are widespread feelings of not being supported at various levels in both the NVC and Focusing communities. Members experience it. So do staff and leaders. This triggers a significant amount of conflict at various levels of these organizations.

It is common for people to start to blame each other for this – after all, doesn't it have to be someone's fault if this is happening?

Well, **perhaps it is the fault of Life!** When we engage in emergent processes, we stimulate the movement of life. And, growth requires support. (More about this in the next paper.)

Energy is needed to continue growing, energy is needed to create support structures - where do we direct our energies? We need to make choices.

Especially in practices that foreground connecting with the edge of aliveness, **it is very easy to offer most of our energies and attention and resources to the leading edge**, the new projects (“new life is better” bias). One needs to consciously stop and remember that good foundations are needed for tall structures, and to make “creating a strong community” a key growing edge goal.

There is another level of complication that can come here.

Once the voice of “not enough” starts to surface, people respond in different ways to it.

Especially if there is concern about not having healthy ways to transform conflict, those who value harmony may try to move forward and hope that the issues will take care of themselves.

This makes sense.

It is a painful to hear that some people feel that they are not receiving the kind of support they need to expand their practice of Focusing or NVC, or that they do not feel safe in working through their own interpersonal and organizational experiences within the community. After all, **Focusing and NVC are offered as support and to promote safety and empathy.**

This can make it hard to address this systemically, if it becomes too embarrassing or painful for leadership.

## 8. The elimination of group orienting structures makes it very challenging for workgroups to efficiently coordinate efforts.

[This is a very large issue. I do not do it justice here. I shall address this more in a future article because of **how much** this affects NVC and Focusing in decision-making situations. I want to bookmark that here]

Leadership can be seen as a form of orientation and guidance.

We humans often orient to a person as leader, taking cues from that person or council.

We can also orient to a vision or a principle as guiding us, using that as a reference point.

A third way is to have an effective and ongoing group process that allows us to experience a sense of "the larger whole" and orient to that.

Whatever way we use, there needs to be **some** kind of orientation **that references more than just one's inner experience, one's own self, when operating in the interpersonal spheres in shared decision-making.**

This is different from when using Focusing or NVC as a personal process, or in a support group.

The belief that "*There should not be any shoulds*" can generate complex and painful conflicts in groups. It predisposes to an attachment void and lack of orienting cues in groups. Why? Because, while 'should' can be used to dominate and suppress, the term "**should**" **refers to guidelines and beliefs about the relationship and responsibility of the individual to the group and vice versa**

When this interrelationship between individual and group has been disabled, people may find themselves feeling upset, frustrated, disconnected, self-protective, and perhaps a bit disoriented about the lines of power and influence, often without being aware that this key structural dynamic has

been disabled without finding another way to maintain group-individual alignment.

These are deep instinctual responses. **“Orientation”** is not even listed as a need in NVC. But, I suggest that it is one of the more important ones - we need to have something to orient to that is effective. We need to have a sense of *"How does this universe work here?"*

If we are not sure about which of our life energies are welcome and how they synchronize with those around us, we can expend a great deal of anxious energy ‘searching for signal’, like a cell phone that has not locked in to its signal tower, or we have people tuned into their own personal channels, trying to communicate without having adequate shared alignment.

## **9. Aging founders and succession issues.**

Both the NVC and Focusing communities have revered founders who are close to the end of their lifespan. (They were at the time of this article. Since then, they have both passed on.) There are several challenges that are typical for organizations at this painful place in their evolution, including mourning, and issues of succession.

There is so much there – **no wonder** that this can all be so frustrating, heartbreaking, stressful, challenging...

In a way, we are victims of our own beauty. This is a painful and difficult situation, partly set in motion because of **how effective** the Focusing and NVC processes are, how much they speak to people about a more beautiful way of living. Our desire for more grows directly from how useful these awareness practices and tools can be, to help us make that dream a reality.

It is partly set in motion by some of the limitations within Focusing and NVC processes that lead to problems in certain kinds of situations.

It is partly set in motion because we are still in the process of learning ways of being with one another that respect individual process and share leadership, yet also allow groups to work together effectively.

It is partly set in motion by our love for Gene and for Marshall, and the difficult situation of the human predicament, of illness, aging, loss, and death.

It is partly set in motion because this perfect storm leaves many people wanting support. And, with stymied beautiful needs, comes very painful and distressing feelings, and a tendency to want to blame someone – often the very people that we had thought we could count on to help us through this...

All of these things can easily lead us to focus on what is **not** working, and engage the reflexive finger-pointing that increases pain and limits creativity.

Some degree of this may be inevitable. After all, we are human. Our good intentions will help, but will not save us from our nature.

It may help to acknowledge that this is not a failure, but part of the process:

- A way through the collapse of the attentional field is by **offering** interhuman attention.
- And, the collapse of the attentional field has been worsened by **insufficient** interhuman attention.
- If we only had what we do not have, we perhaps could move through this.

What can we do in this situation?

What comes for me is to pause here. To pause and breathe, feeling the dilemma of being human and wanting to become more open and more caring and more loving, wishing that the support for this were available...

Being in the longing, and being with the longing...

Perhaps we can allow ways to emerge in which we can hold ourselves, and each other, with tenderness and deep respect for what we have devoted ourselves to - and to what we often fall short of, for reasons that are not only and not always about our own limitations...

Being with the longing can call more love into being.... A sort of embodied prayer...

## Suggestions for ways forward from here

I think that empathy for the real challenges and heartbreak in the situation is important. I find that it helps me to relax into the real difficulties.

With a larger shared understanding, we can begin to face this together.

Acknowledging the situation and the accompanying feelings may help loosen the narrow focus that pain causes, and might help bring some empathy and insight into the situation.

It may help align hearts and minds to hold the pain, and move forward individually and collectively.

Circles of conversation, circles of support seem helpful. This is something we do well.

Perhaps sharing this article, others' thoughts, and hosting small conversations that start with pausing and checking: *"What comes for you around this?"*

As part of this, it may be helpful to invite people into an exploration of appreciation for the beautiful needs met by the practice and by community, and also of the beautiful needs unmet – then, perhaps sensing into what kind of support is needed.

There is a process in NVC, called the **Mourn-Celebrate-Learn process**, which could be offered in a personal or collective process across the community. In it,

- one mourns needs not met
- celebrates needs that have been or are met
- and offers what they have learned from this.

The learning can have one or two aspects:

1. Looking back – now that I/we know this, what could I/we have done differently?
2. Looking forward – Now what do I/we want to plan for the future, how do I/we want to try to meet these needs in the future?

After this, some people might want to participate in a shared inquiry into “what kind of support do need?” and “how can we support each other, given all of the limitations and challenges that exist?” could also help carry things life-forward.

This might be done within one or two ‘hosting circles’ first, and later expanded to larger circles.

Those who undertake to offer this process to the larger whole, will need to create a community of support for themselves, as well.

A strong center is essential. I applaud the interim Board’s work in that direction, and hope that they will continue to be a solid connected group.

The hosting groups can choose particular processes geared to the size of the group.

The Focusing discussion list can be a good place for sharing thoughts, feelings, and suggestions, yet at the same time, e-mail lists have their limits, especially when it comes to creating sufficient safety for certain kinds of conversations. Some of this work may need to take place in different kinds of settings...

Then there is a whole family of emergent group processes, such as Open Space Technology, World Café, Dynamic Facilitation, Restorative Circles, and, various other circle processes, that could be used to support larger scale conversations within the community.....

For anyone who has read this far, thank you for your attention and your caring.

May we appreciate the important, challenging, painful, and glorious work that we are doing, of bringing more openness and care and attention to our evolving unfolding world.

Thank you,

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