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## **PREFACE**

*Nearly all the participants have gathered. Only three name badges remain unclaimed and two of those belong to consultants. It will send just the right message if we start at the stroke of 8:00, so I ask Frances if she is ready and then I take my place at the front of the room, facing 52 empty chairs. Alfredo nods to me that the music is cued up; Frances switches on the small ceiling spot lights and readies the gong.*

*Setting something in motion fills me with a unique thrill – and trepidation. I stand at the edge of the dock looking into the dark lake, still and immobile, until all at once, surprising even myself, I lower my head, bend my knees, throw my arms forward and dive into the cool water. The conductor raises his baton, knowing that when he brings it down, a 100-piece orchestra will set off on a one-way journey, in harmony but with each musician making his own way and taking his own responsibility for the success of the whole.*

*I take a breath, center my stance, and nod at Frances: Gong... pause... pause.. Gong... pause... pause...and Brown Sugar comes pouring out of the loudspeakers. The Rolling Stones is much too big a sound for this hour of the morning, but we need something too big, because the next three days are going to be very big indeed! The first few participants file in hesitantly; I smile at them so they know they're in the right place. Now they stream in, leaving the front row nearly empty for the stragglers. I acknowledge the few faces I recognize and then nod to Alfredo to bring the music down.*

*“Good Morning! I’m Dan Newman and we will be working together for the next three days.”*

Frances's gong and my opening words are like the narrow neck of an hourglass. A great deal of preparatory work converges on that welcome, and an almost infinite range of possible outcomes radiates out from the same moment. As a facilitator, it is my job to ensure that we have assembled the right elements in the upper teardrop of the hourglass and then to provide just enough direction to the movement of the sand during the workshop itself and afterwards so that the lower teardrop fills up in the most satisfying way possible.

All the things I love about facilitating and all the things I fear about it rush through me in those first few minutes. First the love: I love working with a large facilitation team. I love not knowing what the solution is but knowing that there will be one. I love the music. I love learning the client's business, their private language, guessing who the good guys are and who the bad guys are, the secrets to their successes and failures. I love the environment. I love the design I've made and I can't wait to see how it unfolds. And although I'm usually shy, I love being the focus of attention of so many people.

I love facilitating and I fear it.

What do I fear? I fear the surprise that the client sponsor will spring on me. I fear the small detail that is out of place (the big ones I can work around). I fear speaking too softly or too fast. I fear not being liked. I fear the superficial solution. I fear I have fallen in love with my design and will realize its failings too late. I fear the food will be bad, or late. I fear I'll mispronounce someone's name. I fear they won't pay.

This is when I sometimes spare a thought for the client sponsor. When I sold this event a few weeks earlier, I said it would dramatically reduce the risks inherent in the project at hand. And though I know this to be true, I also know that the sponsor doesn't believe it. Handing control of such a large group of people to me and my team for three full days probably feels like one of the biggest risks this sponsor could take. I feign calm. I smile so that my sponsor can smile too and show the participants that they are in safe hands.

Where does my confidence come from? It comes from understanding the variables that will ensure the success of our event and knowing that these variables can be managed:

**The Problem.** We have invested several weeks understanding the problem to be solved or the solution to be designed. Most importantly, we have coached the sponsor team – the handful of leaders who visibly embody the need for the event and own its outcome – to understand where they are aligned or misaligned in understanding the problem. The problem has been shared with the participants prior to the event, though there is not likely to be consensus or even much understanding of its nature.

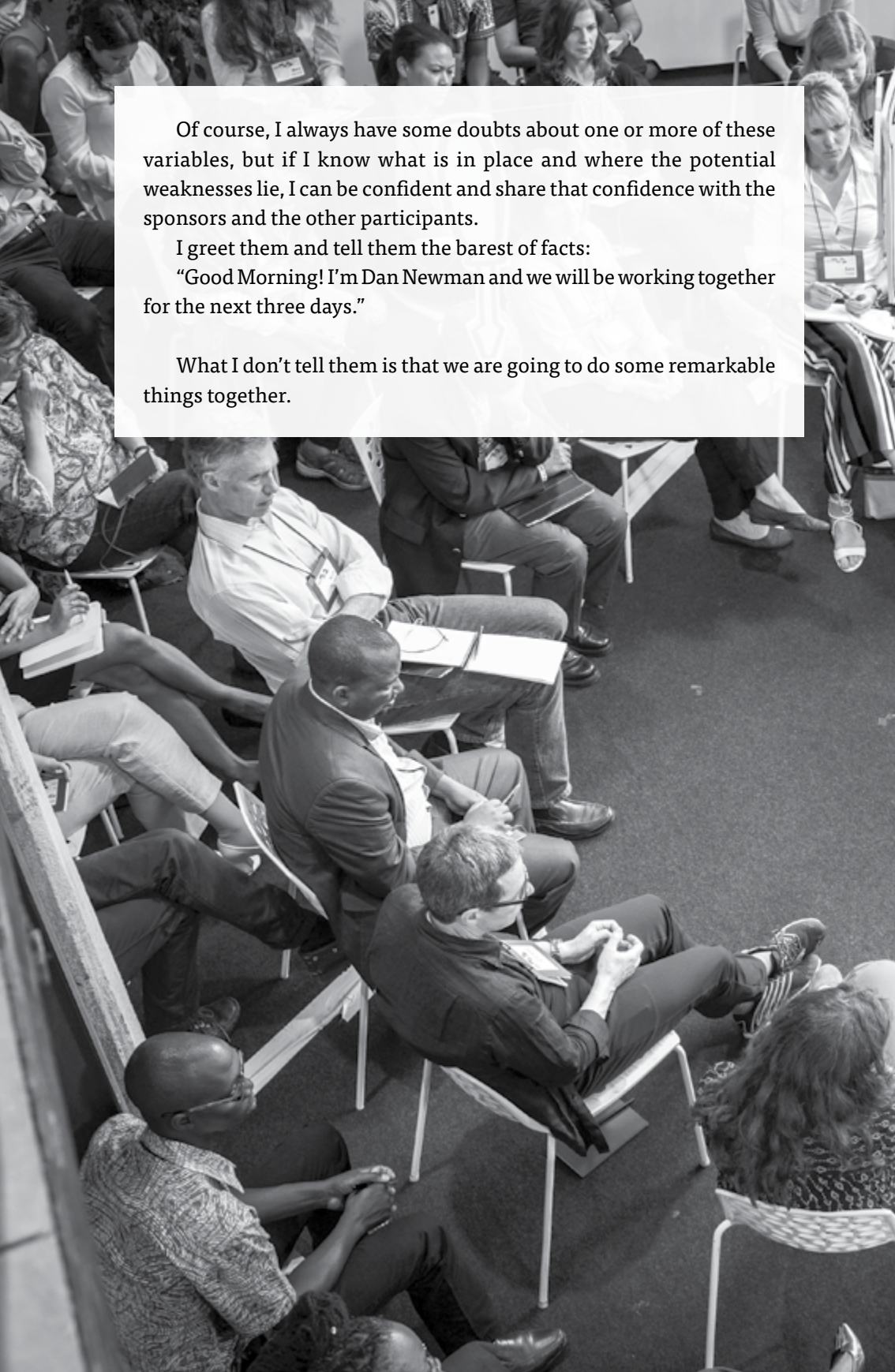
**The Solution.** A solution to the problem *can* exist. No one sees it yet (or perhaps everyone sees a different one) but we are sure that the problem is not insoluble. Even more importantly, the sponsors have convinced me that they do not have a pre-cooked solution that they will spring on the participants after creating the illusion that this was a truly collaborative process.

**The Participants.** We've invited a good cross-section of participants, representing conflicting points-of-view, cutting across the hierarchy, with sufficient knowledge of how things work and don't work. Everyone will contribute from beginning to end without interruption, particularly the sponsors.

**The Inputs.** All the information, analysis and other content elements needed for the participants to do their work and take informed decisions have been assembled.

**The Facilitation Team.** We have the right mix of skills and characters to facilitate the client and sustain each other. We like each other and can share a laugh.

**The Environment.** We have sufficient space, light, fresh air, sustenance, access, furniture, equipment and flexibility to accommodate the type of work called for in each module. If we're working on-line, we have a team that can stay on top of the technology with sufficient redundancy to manage the inevitable tech failures.



Of course, I always have some doubts about one or more of these variables, but if I know what is in place and where the potential weaknesses lie, I can be confident and share that confidence with the sponsors and the other participants.

I greet them and tell them the barest of facts:

“Good Morning! I’m Dan Newman and we will be working together for the next three days.”

What I don’t tell them is that we are going to do some remarkable things together.



