

Shrink Rap Radio #150, April 25, 2008, Wisdom Councils and Dynamic Facilitation
David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka "Dr. Dave" interviews Jim Rough, Consultant, Speaker,
Seminar Leader, Author, and Social Innovator
(Transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Sandra Huang)

Excerpt: *We're following energy, which is psychic energy really. Often the energy starts with a solution rather than defining the problem. In this case, we're just taking what bubbles up and we're expecting that solutions will probably be first. We call it the purge, so we try and pull out from the person what they would do, so it's sort of like going to the end of the meeting first, because some meetings; everybody talks and defines the problem, and in the end, the very end, you start talking about what you really would do. What we're trying to do is bring the what you would really do right up front and then have the whole meeting to be talking from the heart about what you really want.*

Introduction: That was the voice of my guest, Jim Rough. Jim Rough is a consultant, speaker, seminar leader, author and social innovator. He originated dynamic facilitation, which according to his website is a new way of facilitating meetings that assures creative collaborative thinking which is now being used all over the world. For almost two decades he has presented public seminars on this innovation; Jim also created the Wisdom Council which is a new approach to facilitating large systems of people to work together creatively. He describes this innovation as applied to the nation and the world in his book *Society's breakthrough: Releasing Essential Wisdom and Virtue in All the People*. He's co-founder of the non-profit Center for Wise Democracy and for twenty years Jim was on the faculty of the Annual Creative Problem Solving Institute in Buffalo, New York. Now here's the interview.

Dr. Dave: Jim Rough, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Jim Rough: Thank you, David. Really glad to be here.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I'm glad to have you here talking about your approach to facilitating meetings because I know this is work that you have been doing over a course of a number of years and that you've evolved your own distinctive approach. And before we get into what your approach is, maybe we should start with where do most meetings go wrong? I mean, I've been in meetings and business settings and academic settings and a lot of the time it feels like, I don't know, they're a waste of time.

Rough: (laughs)

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Rough: I think a lot of it, David, is in the quality of the thinking process. What we really want to have happen is for people to find out what's best, to be listening to one other, to be creative, to be respectful and to...the best answer of all, would be to have a breakthrough.

Dr. Dave: Yes, well I think people maybe often will start off with that kind of intention but somehow they don't get there. What are the ways in which, you know, the tradition structures from meetings don't work?

Rough: Well, that's exactly right. The tradition structures are more aimed, I think, at protecting people than they are at aiming for a breakthrough, so that you try and define the problem first, then you stay on the agenda, and you follow a linear path and you suppress your emotions. You try not to be too passionate otherwise people will get hurt. So there's a lot of devices that people use to keep sort of themselves safe, I think is basically what's happening.

Dr. Dave: Ummhmm. So how did you come to evolve your approach? How did it...you know...take us a little bit through your own personal evolution of how you got to where you are today.

Rough: All right, if I go way back, my mother was the kind of person that everybody loves to be talking to and my father was the kind of person that could make an argument out of any agreement and so I think I had a natural propensity to be really sensitive about what's happening in meetings and I wanted to be like my mother; I didn't want to be like my father.

Dr. Dave: Uh huh.

Rough: And I worked in a, as a consultant in a timber company and I was, I had the opportunity...I talked management into trying a particular process that was called Quality Circles at the time.

Dr. Dave: Oh, I remember that. That was a big movement in the business world.

Rough: It was.

Dr. Dave: I guess it originally...it was developed in this country but nobody paid attention to it and the guy who developed it...somehow people in Japan picked up on it. And...

Rough: They sure did.

Dr. Dave: And Japan started producing like all these high quality cars (laughs) and so on and so then people in the U.S. got excited about it. Is that right?

Rough: Yes, that is. And there were some rules about how...Quality Circles, what happened and some of the ideas were that management would be involved and there would be training for people and there was a particular process people would go through. And I talked management into giving me the permission to meet with employees but they didn't want to be involved, management didn't. And they didn't want to have anybody go

to training or anything like that and they basically just said "Jim, go make these people feel better and we don't really expect much from this."

Dr. Dave: Mmmhmm.

Rough: And what they did, in essence, is create a laboratory for me to try different group processes and group process technologies and really to find out that they don't, they didn't work, at least in that environment.

Dr. Dave: Now, had you already had some training and different approaches to leading groups?

Rough: I had been for a number of years on the facility of the Creative Problem Solving Institute in Buffalo, New York. It was called CPSI.

Dr. Dave: Yes, I've heard of them.

Rough: And so I was guided, brain storming and helping people do synectics and different creative thinking processes, and I basically found that they didn't work for emotional, the kinds of emotionally attached problems that these guys had. You can't take somebody who just hates their job and hates what's going on and say "Hey, let's brainstorm some ideas to change it." It's just...they don't know what to do with that.

Dr. Dave: Mmmhmm.

Rough: So, and I was also learning and thinking about Jungian psychology in my own growth process.

Dr. Dave: Oh, good, you know I'm interested in that right.

Rough: (laughs) Yes.

Dr. Dave: (laughs)

Rough: So I was interested in saying "Okay, well if creativity really exists then we ought to be applying it to the big problems that are out there." And for these mill workers, the big problems were "Hey, I hate my foreman and I want that pay cut that I lost four years ago, you know, I want it back." And so there was...

Dr. Dave: Yeah, you're up in the Pacific Northwest so that was a...maybe it still is, a troubled industry right? And falling on hard times?

Rough: Well, yeah this is all twenty some years ago at the time. But it's all so gone now that I don't know if it's got hard times.

Dr. Dave: Wow.

Rough: But, anyways, the process for me was realizing that I wanted to help these guys solve their problems and I wanted to help them be creative in doing it. And that was what I saw as the goal, it's like here you have an impossible to solve problem, or seemingly impossible to solve problem. Let me...if creativity works and that's an appropriate match, we'll be creative and when I tried brainstorming and these kinds of processes, it really wasn't appropriate. It was not an appropriate thinking process and I was studying Jungian psychology at the time and I said "How do I bring more of the Jungian bent into this group thinking process?" And I started experimenting and toying around....um.

Dr. Dave: Well let me just cut in and...what in particular about the Jungian bent were you trying to tap into or wanting to bring into the process?

Rough: I would say that the core of it is to put the lead in the hands of the unconscious.

Dr. Dave: Okay, so you have kind of a faith and trust in the unconscious that if people were to lead from that, come more from that place, that it would take it to a good place?

Rough: Yeah, if we can release that capability, that deep in...that deep inner connectedness with the universe and with life then we'll find that there's a richer deeper path that we're on and one that we're in connection with other people.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Rough: And I, to me, like for instance, brainstorming relies on the creative unconscious to deliver ideas but what you say, you have a superior process in play where you're saying "Okay, here's the range of where to work on ideas for uses of a brick or something." And you may come up with lots of different ideas and possibilities but you're still coming up with uses for a brick. And at least the intention or that's being held constant and I, my, me, as a participant in this process, and I'm unchanging; I'm still the same person I was when we started. Whereas the Jungian process, or the, what I now call Dynamic Facilitation and the Choice Creating Process, people, the topic may change depending on what happens, or the, whatever bubbles up, we want to create a space for it.

Dr. Dave: And what I'm also hearing and what you're saying, what I think I'm hearing is that you want this to be more than just a conversation that you think there's some possibility that some sort of transformation will happen in the process.

Rough: That's absolutely right. Each person in the process of the facilitator and of the situation, I mean, when a group... Well, let me give you an example, one time I was working with some loggers and they were working on the issue of how do we get new radios. And we've gone to management, management said no. And so I would help them start working with their passion about getting new radios and we need new radios and that sort of thing. So... and in the conversation of just following that energy the conversation, it comes up that, why do we want new radios for? We're responsible for

safety. And then the big insight was that gosh, if we're responsible for safety, then we should just be able to buy the radios. And so that was a shift that happened as they were thinking, and then all of them felt empowered then to go back to management with the same request but from an entirely different footing. Now they were empowered, saying "This is the situation and we're either in charge of safety or we're not in charge of safety."

Dr. Dave: Yeah, so it kind of moved from what might have been perceived as "We want a new toy" to "This is vital for safety."

Rough: Yeah, so there was something that happened in the process that shifted inside the men and they became strong individually and more capable about what they were doing and they became a "we."

Dr. Dave: Okay, so that's what you, part of what you're seeking then, to secrete that sense of "we?"

Rough: Yes, there are certain shifts that happen, sometimes it's just a new idea about what might be implemented but other times there's this shift of connection, this connectedness between people. Another example, in the mill there was one big equipment operator who would put these big logs for this other one to put through the barker and these guys hated each other for years. And, you know, just bringing them together and giving them this chance to talk in a way that whatever bubbled up there was never any, there's no, in Dynamic Facilitation what we do is somebody will say "Here's what we ought to do" and the other person will start to say "That's a stupid idea." You say "Oh, you have a concern, let me write down this concern." And so we turn what they were going to say that was going to go against the other person into something that adds to this puzzle that we're solving together. And the question would be "Do you have another idea that might be better?" And then we'd get to put that on our list of solutions and in the talking that way, these guys became the best of friends.

Dr. Dave: Wow, that's great. Do you have some ground rules that you lay out at the beginning of a group? I know a lot of different approaches, you know, they'll kind of say "Okay, these are going to be the ground rules so as we move ahead here..."

Rough: Yeah, we basically see that as a process. Setting up a set of ground rules is trying to get people to self control, self regulate, and we really don't want that. We want people to just bubble up and the facilitator's responsibility is to frame this situation so that whatever bubbles up is an asset to the group.

Dr. Dave: Well then, give me an example then maybe of a recent project, you know, how did you start it? How did you frame it?

Rough: Well, one way to do it would be...I'm trying to think of a recent situation but in the Department of Revenue for instance...I mean, well I shouldn't say a client, let me go somewhere else. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Okay.

Rough: All right. In one organization the group would...had a number of issues that they had for years. Maybe eight different issues and we just started talking about them in this way and so I would just allow people to talk. What are some of the issues we might talk about? And they would speak them and if somebody wanted to say "Oh that's not an issue, we shouldn't do that." I'll just say "Oh, you have a concern? Write that down." And I would help the group find the most important issue. Which one is the hottest? And somebody, you know, I just kind of follow the energy of the group, so if there are any conflicts or anything that's pretty hot. So, and often what the energy, we're following energy, which is physic energy really, often the energy starts with a solution rather than defining a problem. Most...

Dr. Dave: Is that good or bad? (laughs)

Rough: It's good, it's good. Most processes would say "Don't jump the solution."

Dr. Dave: Right, right.

Rough: In this case, we're just taking what bubbles up and we're expecting that solutions would probably be first. We call it the purge. We try and pull out from the person what they would do so, it's sort of like going to the end of the meeting first because some meetings kind of, everybody talks and defines the problem, and it's the end, the very end, you start talking about what you really would do.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Rough: What we're trying to do is bring the what you would really do right up front and then have the whole meeting to be talking from the heart about what we really want. So, anyways we're sort of imagining that, we, generally the result is that people would come up with solutions first. It's not always the case, but so we're sort of aware of that and aiming for it and helping people go there to what, okay so you're in charge of the world right now and you want to deal with healthcare, what would you do? How would you set it up? What would be your...or you want to deal with terrorism? And you were in charge. How would you do that? That's when people start to talk and say rather than just harping at what is happening in the political sphere, say, they say "Oh well here's what I would do." Often, there's a response from somebody about how it wouldn't work, or how...you know, what's wrong with you? Or a lot of us have been conditioned to not say what we really think.

Dr. Dave: Yes, and one of the things that you've said in there was talking from the heart and how do you get people to talk from the heart? I mean, one of the things that we learn about meetings, at least in tradition lore, is that often there are what are called hidden agendas which is kind of the opposite of talking from the heart.

Rough: Yeah, yeah, we want to bring those out right away. So what would you do? We want to go past the pretend agenda and just say "Look, here's the issue, we care about it. You are now in charge, we're going to walk out the meeting and an hour, and all of us are going to have our hands upraised and feel really good about what happened and you are. What would we have decided?" So, we're giving this person who would normally have a hidden agenda, we're trying to just cut through it and give them the chance to just blurt out what the real agenda is. And then protect them so that they don't feel any, you know, there's no negative emotion from that. So whatever anybody then says that might be critical, we turn it into something that is positive and keeps the energy going forward.

Dr. Dave: Okay, I'm thinking in a corporate situation, it might be hard to protect somebody because they may be aware that either my boss is in this meeting, or my boss is going to hear about this meeting. Do you ever have to deal with those sorts of issues?

Rough: Well, yeah. The boss in the meeting is we're in pretty good shape because we're going to keep everybody safe and we're going to bring everybody out. So, often what we do is go to the boss first and have the boss purge so the boss is saying what's really on his or her mind and in cutting past the hidden agenda. When the boss isn't in the room, then there's a different thing. What we need to do is protect the environment so that people can speak openly and honestly and if it's a concern about how, what will happen afterwards, then we'll deal with that concern as a separate issue. Like what the boss thinks or gee we might feel repercussions or if any of that is, you know happening...

Dr. Dave: Right.

Rough: ...can't get through.

Dr. Dave: What do you do about big talkers? For years I was in an academic environment and we would have department meetings and we're all psychologists for heaven's sake. We're all supposed to know his stuff and we would just have the most awful meetings so often, and for me one of the things that was the most irritating and challenging were what I call the big talkers; the people who would just go on and on.

Rough: Yeah, I mean, it is a...the hard part for us is that we want to follow the energy and sometimes the extroverted energy is more, seems like it's more than the introverted energy and so we have to be careful that we've followed the deeper energy sometimes. But uh, big talkers, you'd be surprised how if you start this process we call it; to me it's a different kind of thinking. It's not deliberation, it's not dialogue, it's not problem solving, it's not creative problem solving. There's just no word for this other kind of thinking that we're doing in this, and we call it choice creating. So when people do choice creating the big talkers, it takes a lot out of...I mean we all want to be big talkers. In other words we're all like dying to be in the mix...

Dr. Dave: Uh huh.

Rough: ...but if you're a big talker and the person says "Tell us really the answer. What are you trying to say? Are you selling the idea? Or do you want to just...can you just tell us what the idea is before you sell it?" Or you know, matters what we really want is that we call it a purge because when the person speaks it, they don't have to keep selling it. They don't have to keep talking. It's so much in the big talking that happens is because people have in mind some end that they're trying to get to that they can't really just say out front. So they're talking around and in terms, really making a big play about how we define a problem or really making a big play about which data the point is actually accurate or not. We don't have to do all that because we're going to jump to the end and it isn't that important what data points are most accurate.

Dr. Dave: I would think that a lot of the success of this would depend upon the skill of the facilitator and I'm under the impression that part of what you do is to train people to be facilitators of your process. What are the skills or abilities or talents that the facilitator needs to have?

Rough: Yeah, that's a great question. It's true; I've been teaching this now and evolving it for twenty years or nineteen years I guess. And so we've evolved it to a point where there is a process, a technique, some skills that people can learn and where it's transferrable and people can do it. And they can, when I say do it, they can assure choice creating as the quality of thinking in the room. Um, one of the most important ones is I think to have the dynamic facilitator hold the new paradigm. Hold the paradigm of Jungian of knowing that what's coming up is valuable and the impossible to solve problems can be solved. And we're seeking diversity and excited about "disagreement" and when the effort of the dynamic facilitator has that paradigm it is conveyed to the group. The group begins to get it, that "Hey, this is a different kind of thinking here. We don't...we're not trying to solve what we know what we can solve. We're trying to find where our energy is, we're trying to find those problems that we can't do anything about that we really care about and solve those."

Dr. Dave: So, it sounds like that an important part of the process then is that the facilitator is modeling a kind of attitude and a kind of energy.

Rough: Yes, yes, of that perspective, yes.

Dr. Dave: And then are there other sources of concrete skills that that person needs to be trained in?

Rough: There are. There are. There's an ability of reflect, we call it reflecting. (laughs)

Dr. Dave: (laughs) Oh, I like that.

Rough: Yeah, it's really about that the facilitator is really putting their brain on loan to the group. In other words, I am the group when I'm standing there. So I'm helping the group think and so when someone says something, I don't stand there and say "Oh, gee, does everybody agree to that?" I am the group, so in a way if I can put myself aside and help

the group just be, each person be empowered to stand up and say "No, I don't feel that way" if they don't. So I'm just going with what each person says and guessing what they're really trying to say and just totally in service to the group and that's a key ability and skill to do. And then, helping people feel empowered to say "Hey, that's not quite right" and then being excited when somebody has some difference because that opens the door to a breakthrough possibility.

Dr. Dave: Okay, so reflecting or reflecting, that sounds a little Rogerian to me. It reminds me of Carl Rogers and the emphasis that he puts on helping people to feel heard by being able to say back kind of what he's hearing in different words. Is that essentially what you're describing?

Rough: It is except there's two, there's a couple of differences I guess. One is there's reflecting to the individual but there's, but this is more of a process of reflecting to the group. So you're building a group consciousness as well so there's the two sides to this.

Dr. Dave: Ummhmm.

Rough: And another one is just um, in the reflecting process we try and...hit...hit and go to the real, we try to guess and go to what the person's really trying to say.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Rough: What the group is really trying to say. And that sounds Rogerian I guess.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Would you say something like what I hear is saying is or...

Rough: No.

Dr. Dave: No.

Rough: Try not to say that.

Dr. Dave: Okay. What would you say?

Rough: Yeah. Because the what I hear you saying is puts me over here and you over there.

Dr. Dave: No, I said what I hear us saying.

Rough: Or, well okay.

Dr. Dave: And trying to speak for the group.

Rough: Yeah, well rather an individual in the group, a participant might say that but a facilitator tries to put all that language away and just basically say the thing. Say the

reflection so we are saying that there are, or you were saying that you know, just putting out the what I hear you saying or what I hear us saying or getting rid of that beginning language...

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Rough: ...or important fact is an important aspect to this just because it emphasizes that there's a me here.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Rough: Don't want that to be there.

Dr. Dave: Okay, okay. So what else? Give us some more...

Rough: (laughs)

Dr. Dave: ...about (laughs) the rules and the structure and so on.

Rough: Well, you know...

Dr. Dave: I'm just trying to get as concrete an idea of...and I gather it's hard for you to make it really concrete.

Rough: Yeah, it is. I've been gradually moving to be more concrete as we go because originally it was just like if you can hang onto this prospective then you can do it. And now it's become more concrete as we go. The one of the key pieces of this is, I think, as a skill the facilitator has is to be able to recognize when the group reaches, we don't use the word, we try not to use the word decision, you're stuck with that word, but any form of decision is actually a form of denial so there's a...when I made a decision, I'm cutting out all of this other stuff that could have been there that I'm just going to say "Okay, that doesn't count anymore. I'm going to put that in denial."

Dr. Dave: Ummhmm.

Rough: This is a different process of thinking; we're not making a decision. We actually end up with choices that we are going to do and are unanimous about. But we didn't make any decision to get there. We actually...that's why we call it choice creating instead of decision making. It's a process of sort of mulling at this deep authentic level and then where the "decision" is apparent, then it's emergent. And we use the word "of course," it's an of course, you know, we just put the letters and of course we're going to do that. It's just sort of self evident after we think in this way.

Dr. Dave: Well, that sounds great. (laughs)

Rough: (laughs)

Dr. Dave: You can get to that point where everybody says "Well, of course."

Rough: Yeah, it is. You know, the thing is is that it's out of that process that because that is possible to do and one of the things that makes is possible is recognizing that the, the facilitator needs to recognize that the problem statement, what we're working on, has changed. That is, rather than saying "Uh oh, we got to get back to what we started talking about." What happens is that the group shifts its energy and now the problem has become something else and so there's...so a lot of the of course and a lot of the breakthroughs often are in "Oh, the real problem is this." And you know, it's just a different thing and we can't solve the problem at that level. And I know you started reading my book *Society's breakthrough* but that's kind of how I got to that concept of how we could transform our society possibly is that in the seminars people would work to practice dynamic facilitation. They would work on...one group would go in a corner and work on health care and another group would go in a corner and work on terrorism, and another group would go in a corner and work on, you know, inner city crime or something. And often these groups would often have these shifts in breakthroughs from the process where they realize "Hey, this problem isn't being caused by bad terrorists or bad people; it's being caused by the system." And often this would happen, I mean so often it would be almost embarrassing. So many groups would point to the system and say "The system is causing this problem." And so over time, I began to get it. Okay, what's the system? How did the system cause this problem? What is this system and how did we get one? And, so following that thread, I mean, those would be those breakthroughs that would happen in the small groups and then a big breakthrough to me was to realize the importance of the U.S. Constitution in defining our system for instance. And how, you know, how that there's no "We the people". There was a "We the people" when it got started but now there's just a constitution in charge of us and it's preprogrammed to, in a certain direction, that now causes lots of problems.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, in your book you talk, I remember you have some diagrams talking about different organizational structures and there's the triangular structure which is a very hierarchical decision making structure and then you've got what you call the box structure which is kind of rule governed. And then you have circular structure, or at least that's how you've symbolized these...

Rough: Yes.

Dr. Dave: ...different systems and the circle is more the idea that you've been talking about, of kind of a level playing field of we looking one another in the eyes and not being governed either by the hierarchy or being bound by the rules as much as bound by common concern and passion.

Rough: That's exactly right. The triangle...I do...I think there are three fundamental organizational structures for society, for organizations, for you name it. For families, one is the triangle where hey I'm in charge; I'm the boss, so that's how we make collectively intelligent decisions, we just rely on one person and everybody else learns to be loyal.

The other one is, I think, is where we are now in our society is we've tried to set up a system that is based on the rule of law where it's not based on a person, it's based on a contract, where the contract is in charge and we're...we exist inside that set of rules and there's no we outside in charge. And then the third level of system is honest authentic conversation among all of us where we evolve what the answers are or what the systems need to be and where we define the system and I think we...there is in our society today if we're going to survive and thrive we need to get to that circle system. And that which means moving to the next level beyond where the constitution is in charge of us at the...that's at the society level there needs to be we the people; a we the people conversation. And seeing that maybe it's easier to see in organizations that many organizations, you know, have a triangle structure or they might have a...many government organizations have kind of a box structure where the rules are in charge. And then people say "Hey, we voted on this, why" ...or they have some kind of structure in charge...why...the first group says "We just need a strong leader in here who can make the decisions and then we'll know what to do." The next group says "Hey, we voted on this. Why aren't we doing it? I don't understand." And the circle group says "Hey, let's talk. Why can't we talk? Let's just visit and talk and figure out what we need to do here." Well, the talking that's needed to make that circle system work is choice creating.

Dr. Dave: Okay, well it certainly sounds good to me. (laughs)

Rough: (laughs)

Dr. Dave: You can sign me up for that. What if people want to find out more about your thinking and your work? I know you've got a website. Do you want to put that out there?

Rough: Yeah. Dynamicfacilitation.com is the seminars and then the facilitation. And our website for our non-profit organization that's bringing the wisdom council to non-profits and to society in different communities and so forth is www.wisedemocracy.org.

Dr. Dave: Okay, well Jim Rough. I want to thank you so much for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Rough: Well, thank you very much David. I really appreciate it.