

Celebrating Black Female Facilitators

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Shelby Pierce

Shelby Pierce is currently working to transition into becoming a full-time ToP Facilitator and Trainer. She has worked in administration in various fields including investment advisory and dentistry for the last 10 years. Taking what she has learned from leading meetings in these fields, Shelby is looking to expand the organizations she works with. Shelby lives in Sioux City with her husband, Austin, and two cats. She is a rollerskating, public radio, and morel mushroom hunting enthusiast.



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Here is Shelby's story about her life and facilitation journey

What's your background?

- I am in my thirties.
- For the last six years, I have worked as an Executive Assistant for a financial investment firm.
- I love to connect people.
- As part of my current job, I have facilitated our weekly staff meetings for years. While doing so, I had often found myself often thinking, *I wish I could run other people's meetings.*
- I also facilitate in a weekly women's circle. Which is what first introduced me to facilitation as a practice.
- Last year, while serving on a nonprofit board is when I first experienced ToP methods.
- When I took my first ToP class as a participant, I thought, *this is the thing I've been waiting for.*

In the ToP (Technology of Participation) Foundational Methods Course, I was struck when I first learned the Focused Conversation method and using ORID to structure the conversation. What washed over me was that the ORID exists on a personal level in our brains, but when we meet for example, together as a group at the reflective level, I realized the whole group is identifying

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inside that level simultaneously. And, the healing power is taking the whole group through all the steps. The thing I love about the O level is that it provides an entry point – “an electric moment” for the group to enter into dialogue with one another.

So now I am on the journey to certify as a ToP facilitator. In addition to this, I’ve started my ToP trainer apprenticeship journey. I am now actively learning from my mentors and jumping in to do focused conversations, consensus workshops and action planning as much as possible. I am constantly rereading the ToP course materials and am taking advantage of the ToP resource library. The depth and usefulness of these methods feels like studying for a Master’s degree and I definitely feel like I’ve willingly thrown myself into the deep end of the pool.

How does your racial heritage play out in facilitation?

I am multi-racial: Black, White and Native American. With this background and strong tendencies toward empathy, my heritage informs my ability to communicate across various experiences and be sensitive to the differences that come with other’s own culture. I have an authentic curiosity about every person I encounter. I’ve learned to create space for everyone’s experiences to be honored in the room.

As a facilitator, I feel like I need to maintain a strong sense of my identity—even while I am navigating the complexities of that identity.

For example, a woman who has a darker complexion than me told me she knows the world perceives me differently than her—especially as light skin has been seen as being better (i.e. colorism). When I said that I was of mixed race, she heard I was better than her because I have white heritage. To be a better ally, I’ve learned it is not helpful for me to differentiate me from the Black community. So this has brought me to own that I am an African American woman (without qualification).

Safety and trust are so important to get a group to work with one another. In the role of facilitator, we need to maintain a very strong sense of what that meeting requires. I am very aware that sometimes means knowing what to “turn off” especially around race. Here is an example: When we were modeling the consensus workshop in the ToP class, one topic offered was “getting out of a speeding ticket.” My group chose this topic. As we were preparing and bantering around, I became aware that I was the only African American person in the room. The way I perceived the police was so different from my White colleagues. I picked the question because I thought it would be fun, but quickly it became the opposite.

My group suggested that one solution might be to switch seats with the driver. My reaction was, *If I did that, I would get shot.* My mind went to the reality of fatal encounters with the police. I consciously chose to hold back my reaction because I was facilitating. But when we unpacked the technique, I felt safe enough to share with my small group. I gave myself permission to share what had happened for me internally, what I had had to shut down. I shared the fear and aloneness I felt as the only person of color in the room. Later, many expressed that this was one of the most powerful moments of the day.

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Who are White Allies that you've met in your work?

White allies are those who say no to keep doing the same thing (i.e. always hiring, training, and working within their own constituency group). The White allies are clear that they want more of us to join them in this profession.

Deb Burnight, a ToP mentor trainer and certified facilitator, has been a tremendous ally for me in this certification journey. She had asked me if I had any interest in being a ToP facilitator because she saw a natural intuition in me. I told her, "Yes, this is the work I want to do." After that course I asked Deb out for coffee and I asked if I could shadow her on jobs. She very generously shared her schedule and I have followed her around as much as possible. I have had unfettered support from Deb.

Another important ally in my life has been the Executive Director of our radio station. Since the community we live in is largely White, he came to me and said, "Your community is not represented. Would you have any interest in having a show?"

I now serve as a co-host of a program, we are not a Monolith, for our local public radio station in Sioux City, Iowa. We are not a Monolith is a show for and about African Americans. Although our radio station's audience tends to be older White liberals, my hope is that through using focused conversations and consensus workshops we will help our station reach our Black community. We want African Americans in our area to be the life force of this show. So what we are asking local members of our African-American community is: What do you want to hear about? Who else do you want to come on our show? What is important to you?

The Executive Director has given us a platform and his permission to explore the avenues we want on air. Although he has never told us to do it a different way, he does give us feedback when we ask him for it.

What is something that allies might not want to know?

There are times that I've been told, "I did not know you were Black. I never thought of that." Something about being comfortable in your White community brings on this colorblindness. Who I am and especially my cultural background is so important? As I get older, not a day goes by that I do not think about my heritage and I'm grateful when this is acknowledged.

Do you have any words of advice to others?

There are still not enough facilitators. If this is an area of interest or passion, pursue it. Ask whatever you are curious about. If you think, *this is interesting*, ask potential mentors to spend more time with you and share their wisdom. There is so much to be done with facilitation. The work is transformative and can be tremendously healing.

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Eileen Pippins

Eileen Pippins is a Learning Organizational Development (LD/OD) Specialist, educator, and dynamic facilitator based in the heart of the Oakland/San Francisco Bay Area. With over 15 years' experience in both higher education and consulting, Eileen brings focused and exciting energy to her clients. Her "why" in consulting helps people have the conversations they need to have in order to achieve the goals they set. Eileen has been involved with the ToP Network since 2017 and hopes to become a trainer and complete MToP. As she works toward completing her doctorate in Organizational Psychology, Eileen also finds time to play with vegan recipes, swim and travel.



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Here is Eileen's story about her life and facilitation journey...

My background

I am currently transitioning out of higher education as an educator. For 15 years, my primary role has been as an educator, and program coordinator. I am a professor of communication and advertising, teaching among other things, interpersonal communication, intercultural communication and persuasion. I am also working on my doctorate in Organizational Psychology. I am looking now to put more focus in the realm of Organizational Psychology and consulting. My non-teaching work has been for Not for Profits and in health care. I also do a lot of coaching around communication and public speaking, helping people who are aiming to be, or declared political candidates.

How facilitation fits into my work

I see facilitation primarily as a way to help people hold the space to get the work done, whether it is conflict management, strategic planning, meetings, or coaching. I use a variety of facilitation techniques. I just learned about ToP methods 2 years ago and have been using Focused Conversation more. I was using something similar without knowing it! My clients are appreciating the ToP methods partly because they are so new to them. I would say that I am an Organizational Development (OD) practitioner/consultant using ToP as one of my modalities.

How I bring my Black culture into the way I lead

This is an interesting question. As a Black woman, I bring diversity and an outlook unique to that experience. Part of who I am is embedded in my identity. It comes out in my examples, frames my worldview and my perspectives. It helps me ask better questions when working with

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clients. I am really good at asking questions, because I do not have a “dog in the fight” (i.e., I’m outside of the client issues). I naturally seek equity and inclusion in the room. I do not play to the politics, but it is part of the culture. I try to speak to where there is equity or lack of equity. Because I am external to their culture I can help. I know when I enter as one of the few (or only) Black women/people in the room. I am very conscious about the conversations that may or may not surface because I am a Black woman, but I don’t let that drive me away from the room.

Things that challenge me about race are....

One of the challenging things I can say about my role has to do with others’ perceptions of my intellect. I’ve had encounters with men and women who have “been surprised” at how creative, intelligent, or experienced I am without even knowing me. Sometimes I’ll even ask, “why would you be so surprised by that?” I still encounter people who express that they feel I am too entitled. They assume their own experience is so much more than mine. That is one of the biggest challenges I get – they cannot seem to believe that I can be so capable. They *want* me to be capable but then are surprised that *I am*.

The other thing that is hard as a Black woman in the USA is gaining access in networking. One of the great things in the ToP network is the networking I’ve been able to do. And yet, I only learned of the ToP network through a graduate school colleague. Not sure I would ever have heard of it if he had not mentioned it to me. Networking is so important because it is about who you know. Unless you have a long testimony of your work, it is a longer road to get work and the trust you need from prospective clients. Through ToP network, I have learned of so many client leads in other states. It has been beautiful for me because networking is happening faster.

Another one of the beautiful challenges I find as a consultant is the follow up with some OD clients. They seem to have a cognitive disconnect around my assigned role as a consultant, and their expectations for me as “an employee”. Additional duties that I did not offer are sometimes expected. It seems to be something about what they wanted that they did not disclose. So, I have learned to be really clear about checking in with clients before and after contracting and setting boundaries before we start. And yet it still comes up from time to time.

White Allies in this work

For non-Black colleagues, I would say do more outreach toward Black colleagues. Be intentional about networking, seeking out and working with Black professionals because we are out here. Provide introductions and referrals. What is not helpful is being excluded because I was not even considered. (e.g., they say to me” Oh I did not even think of you”). I have gotten really good about asking for what I need. “A closed mouth does not get fed”, and it’s nice to share where some other meals can be found.

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Words of advice to other of facilitators of color...

Expand your toolkit especially with the ToP methods because they can also be used in OD. They really are powerful tools. I just finished a course on interest-based approaches to conflict and the processes they offered were very close to the ToP consensus workshop and the ToP focused conversation method (ORID). I cannot say enough about being thoughtful with what tools you add to your toolkit. As an OD consultant and facilitator, we do not manage anyone. Rather we help clients manage their goals and their processes so they can help lead themselves and their people to reach those goals. And as a newer ToP facilitator, facilitation will not only help with your own self-management but also help lead people to manage their own tasks. Facilitation can help you with setting boundaries around where people can and cannot go in their conversations with each other. It helps with both erasing and moving boundaries. Facilitation is empowering.

Mayme Webb Bledsoe

Mayme has worked tirelessly as a community activist for over two decades. She brings the voices of those most marginalized in the African American neighborhoods where she grew up. She is a senior program coordinator for the Duke Durham neighborhood partnership. She uses her skills and experiences to teach neighborhood leadership, protect and preserve local history and empower the underserved. She was awarded the Civic Change Champion award in 2019. Mayme also makes a mean poundcake, loves to play cards and put puzzles together on a lazy afternoon.



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Here is Mayme's story about her life and facilitation journey –

What is your background

My area of work now is in housing and neighborhood development with Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, SE USA. My job title is like a paragraph (laughing): Assistant Vice President/Director Duke Durham Neighborhood Partnership and Community Development Office of Durham and Community Affairs.

I have to say that we are working now more holistically and more relationally than in the past. My current role is external. I work across neighborhoods and sectors - e.g., health, food, disparities, housing and community development. My role is about helping the Duke

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community interface and improve one's quality of life. It is not about being benevolent but coming in from an empowering space and enabling residents to have a say in their own future. My job is to help them "marry" with some of the resources available at Duke.

When we started this 20 years ago, Duke was so new at this – we did not know how to do this. We had trust issues in the community, and we were not accepted. We had to face the gorilla and spend the necessary time to build better relationships. We did not have any people to do this at the time, so we brought in others from outside the University. These people did not really know the bigger pictures. Sometimes their work resulted in good things but other times, it resulted in bad relationships, so we had to come in and clean up. Now we have more internal colleagues within Duke that are engaged in the community.

My work is more about connecting nonprofits in residence, i.e. building relationships, within the community is crucial because Duke is so large and it is hard to know where and how to connect. It can be overwhelming and confusing to those trying to find the right resources. Now that we are one portal, we are more of a collective and can direct people more accurately we can cut down the fatigue of others and trying to find the right resources.

How does facilitation fit into your work?

Being able to facilitate is a blessing and is essential in my work. It is about giving a voice to many of the populations that do not have a voice within Durham. I also use it to help faculty and staff target their wonderful gifts into and alongside the community work.

I know facilitation skills are essential in dealing with poor dynamics and class systems. Most of us have our patterns around class and race for example, deeply embedded in our brains. When we use facilitation methods, it can be effective in working skillfully with this ingrained thinking. It works because it helps people realize we face common issues.

My first task, in this brand new role, starting this year, was dealing with 900 people displaced from their public housing space due to some problems with that site. Imagine there are now 900 people in 16 different hotels! How could Duke University help? We worked with the public housing agency by thinking out of the box. We started asking: how can we show up now? How can we solve this problem both in the short and long term? How can we help people move out of public housing into a new type of life? We used the Focused Conversation specifically to facilitate the dialogue, look at the data we had collected and move the issue forward more comprehensively. And now Duke can come in with their special expertise in banking, housing and community development. If we have these resources? We asked ourselves, how can we apply them here? By using the focused conversation to identify the critical issues that if resolved would take us to a more productive outcome. Right now, residents of public housing do not trust the government housing authority. We cannot get much accomplished until we would walk in their shoes. Numerous conversations are needed, and we have to understand who needs to be in the room to give credence to what we know to be real. How can we translate that and have everyone educate each other both residents educating government and academics and vice versa. We realize we needed to get stereotype assumptions out of the way.

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Bottom line, I feel my job is about pursuing short and long-term movement. It gives me the role of the activist which I was not expecting it. It leads me to speak about what I see and do not see in the space. I can do this because of the way I look - because I'm a native here they might trust me now because I've lived where they have. It gives us a place to connect where an outsider cannot.

Facilitation includes educating others in my community that is "OK to vision" (i.e. imagine a better, different future). Most Black Americans were not given the luxury to envision a better future because we had other, more important issues. To be able to vision in a community that does not have anything, is a journey itself. And (there is the joy of) watching the individuals in that community grow because they can see themselves in their vision. That is what I love about ToP. It provides a space for people who normally wouldn't even know about these methods, to use them to improve their quality of life.

Pauli Murray, first Black Episcopal Priest in the U.S. and the first African American Saint for this church grew up in my neighborhood. She was also a Civil Rights leader. I worked on a project related to this for 20 years and am very proud of the project. We used ToP methods to unearth some of the information that was sensitive and needed to be inclusive. It was amazing to do this work in the midst of confederate statues in the South.

How does your racial heritage play out in facilitation?

I have decided for me to show up as a native to the neighborhood. I have to bring that "lived" experience into the space. I'm part of a village that is about empowering our Black community. I'm proud of this. My mother worked for the first African American insurance company in the nation (North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance). Durham was its home base. We were part of the Black Wall Street of Durham. Like others in my community, this context allowed us to grow up believing we could do almost anything. It was part of our MO (mode of operating). Many of us in our family left the Durham area to do other things. I never thought I'd come back or work at Duke. But when I visited my parents, I came to appreciate this special village where I grew up. I came to realize it was important for me to have this experience and what it taught me.

My mother believed that education was key to life. So, in my day if you went to an integrated school, i.e. mixed Black with White and other races, you went for the experiences. You knew you would face some hard things and face racism, but this gave you the ability to afford an education you normally couldn't afford. Up to the 6th grade, however, I was in a segregated, i.e. all Black school. My teachers were never hired by White institutions, but they had the credentials and gave us a strong education.

It has taken me some time to see how my Black heritage has affected me. I learned that it had a place in any space. It shows up in my work. I'd like to think my facilitative style is to speak truth to power and be the voice that cannot be said in the rooms. My facilitative style is not necessarily common or language from my own Black community. My mentors or elders came from a top down hierarchical experience. They also experienced gender changes quite

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differently than me. Male role models were what people saw and experienced as leaders. I see my facilitator style being shaped by those experience, of how Blackness has showed up for me.

Showing up as a Black facilitator is important to me. I also know it important for other female Black facilitators to show up for one another. How can I be all that I can be even for others who are not here today? The weight of that responsibility can be daunting.

Important lessons for being the voice that cannot speak

As I alluded to before, the weight of this responsibility can be physically damaging to one's body. Only now, can I take what I've learned about my own body health and be responsive to it. I have learned over time I can only do so much. As a result, I've started my succession plan now. I ensure my successors know our guiding principles of building an inclusive community matter. And they understand how to honor the humans we work with in this world.

Who are White Allies that you've met in your work?

It tends to be different for different allies. Some White allies I have worked with a long time and that makes a difference. What I find interesting is who might speak up (e.g., when a racist incident happens) even before I do. It is really important that I am not always the one to bring it up. Allies who have worked with me for a while will sometimes speak before I speak. They may not have lived my experience, but they can at least see when others do something racist. Also, hearing them say, "I realize I did not see that. Now I do", is really important. They are able to call out their own bias or inappropriate behavior.

What words of advice can you give other facilitators of color?

I would say, pace yourself. Know you cannot do it all and be it all. Look for others who look like us and bring them in. Some might say to you, "I do not have the bandwidth for mentoring." But I hope that does not discourage you. Be open to learning from whomever. Don't stop working with mentors of color but be open to have mentors who are White. They still have something to offer. Take a chance. I took a chance because these ToP methods had something to offer me (at the time I joined, I was one of only a few people of color in the ToP network and it stayed that way for decades.) I did not see myself in the ToP group when I started, but I wanted to be part of a learning community. ToP was such a learning community and it met my values.

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Monica D. Murphy, MPH, CTF

Monica is Founder and Lead Facilitator at Murphy Dynamics, LLC in Atlanta, GA. You can usually meet Monica on the dance floor while she's Chicago Style Stepping or doing Detroit Ballroom dancing. She is a native of North Carolina and loves all things Carolina included the Tarheels and the Panthers. She is also a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and graduate of North Carolina Central University which is ranked as one of the top Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the South, "Eagle Pride"!!!



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Here is Monica's story about her life and facilitation journey...

My work as a facilitative leader

I live and work in Atlanta, Georgia, in southeastern USA. My work is around evaluation for the state and large Not for Profits that have federal government funding. I also do curriculum development. I had been working in public health for 12-13 years and had opportunities to do health care work, building coalitions, and community work. Right now, I feel more removed from that, so I set up my consulting company. Murphy Dynamics, my own company, is where I do all my facilitation and community-based work. This work is where I can see I am making a difference. This is what I call my "heart space" work.

I love facilitation. It is interesting to me that I actually love it because I am an introvert. I love to nurture, build and grow relationships and partnerships. I help be "a bridge" to that development of relationships and partnerships. It is about helping people understand, think, talk and work together. I do a lot of my work in Non-Profits. I am working now with a health center & a health system space (e.g., a large community-based health clinic). I also been doing some city and county level work and work with community organizing such as neighborhood associations. I also do training with the federal government in Atlanta.

I think I do these things well

I always try to infuse diversity into the room, whether at the planning or delivery stage. By diversity, I include professional or life experience as well as race, ethnicity and culture. I do this with e.g., quotes and different activities that help people remember and appreciate diversity. I have heard people say I am patient in my facilitation. I bring a calmness regardless of tension or unsettling vibes (vibrations) in the room. I am "overly" organized but try to make sure everyone has a positive experience. I keep the space fun even when topics are heavy by infusing light heartedness in the room.

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I've had people come up to me and say, "I am glad you are doing this". What they are saying is that they are glad to see someone look like them. For those people who say that and have that feeling, my being a black female facilitator creates a different (positive) environment for them.

Some of the hardest things I face as a black female facilitative leader

On the flipside, there are also people who may not be as happy to have me as their facilitator. Some will try to make it hard for you by, for example, resisting engagement. Oftentimes it presents itself in smaller more discrete ways – e.g., I have to talk a lot about my experience and how qualified I am – proving that I am qualified to be here. This happens all over in my life – not just in facilitation. There is always the added layer of pressure to perform well and be seen positively because of the systemic oppression that we experience everywhere all the time.

Allies help by...

Helping me make connections. they invite me to come and present myself to a lot of people who are decision- makers – so I get to make more connections. allies help by "getting behind me" and wanting me to meet lots of people. They provide testimonials based on their experience of me. Sometimes they ask, "What do you want me to write (may give them talking points), where shall I post it and to whom?" This ensures I get my name in front of the right people.

An ally that says, "I will help you figure this out". Or, agrees to help me if I ask them.

Allies don't help when...

In facilitation spaces, it can be the opposite of what I said above. They might say to someone, "Oh Monica can do that", when they do not even know if I can do that. That can make me look bad in front of potential client. They need to understand what I actually do. it is also not helpful for allies to say e.g., "we'll make you a lot of good connections" but they do not take the time to really understand what I do best.

How I grow as a facilitative leader

It helps to be connected to people who are doing the facilitation work – e.g., having a mentor is great. I am also being more assertive and intentional about asking for what I need. As a Black woman, we carry that weight of always having to have the solution and having to figure out things on our own. Being a facilitator has really put me in a position to engage and not be afraid to ask others to share their wisdom. Other people do it all the time and I've learned "it is Ok to do that". These things have helped me to grow. another place I have grown is quieting the feeling that I don't have what I need. For some proposals, I have hesitated because I am not sure whether I am ready for this or qualified to do it. I can spend time talking myself out of doing things because I do not have that experience. Instead I need to think of all that I do have, and I should go for it.

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Advice to other women of color who are developing as facilitative leaders

Remember it does not happen overnight. Each small opportunity to do a little conference call, or a short meeting is still good experience. Identify those types of opportunities you can do and ask to do them. For example, ask, “Can I make the agenda for the meeting?” People can have a whole different experience because of how you set up the agenda. Or, ask to set up the meeting room. You may not be able to be the facilitator, but you still may be able to impact the experience. They will start saying “That meeting was so different. Who did that?” And it will lead to others thinking of you as a resource and see the value of facilitation.

Know that people have different definitions of facilitation, and sometimes their definition is not what you think of as facilitation. Not everyone will see the value of facilitation as you know it. Accept that.

Finally, when a request for proposal (RFP) comes in and that you are not sure you are qualified for it, but you keep thinking about it, go for it. If nothing else, it will be an exercise in writing and thinking through a complex topic.

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