

## **A Survival Guide to Facilitating Successful Meetings**

Over the past year or so, many of my colleagues and I have noticed a increasing demand for meeting facilitators to help direct and manage a variety of meetings, such as public consultations, strategic planning, focus groups, stakeholder feedback and brainstorming sessions.

Everyone has at some point come out of a meeting feeling it was a big waste of time. Often, in a poorly planned and facilitated meeting, people get frustrated, bored, lazy or cynical if a meeting doesn't accomplish much or there's little to inspire or motivate. However, if a meeting is well prepared, focused on outcomes or goals, and facilitated in an efficient, engaging and upbeat manner, it can really help build an organization.

How do you get groups of people to work together to build consensus and participate in meaningful and successful meetings?

Sometimes hiring an independent facilitator is the best solution. A facilitator will motivate a group, build consensus, manage conflict, maintain focus, generate ownership and ultimately, inspire action. An independent facilitator will also be neutral, which maybe ideal when issues are complex, emotional or if a new perspective is required.

Or if hiring a facilitator is not an option, there are several ways to develop your own facilitation skills so you can guide people through a successful meeting.

First and foremost, if you are the facilitator, you should still try to be neutral and offer an open and safe environment for meeting participants. However, if you are also going to be contributing to the group discussion, it is important you not impose your opinions on the group and ensure everyone gets a chance to speak. Then determine your meeting goals and develop an agenda for your meeting to help meet these goals. For instance, you could be meeting to exchange information, to brainstorm, build commitment or to accomplish tasks. Whatever the reason, be clear on what you hope to achieve and let the group know the desired outcome prior to beginning the meeting.

As with any form of communications, it is important to understand your audience, or in this case, who will be attending the meeting. What is their background? What do they need/want to know from you? What do you want from them? Will this group of people work well together? And regardless of their background, always treat everyone the same in the meeting.

Try to encourage everyone to participate and speak up if they seem shy or reluctant to disagree with a speaker. Ask if anyone has a different point of view. Open-ended questions

are also helpful to get people engaged because they require more than a yes or no answer. Some examples: “What do you think we should do?” “Could you say more about that?”

To ensure everyone is on the same page and that I am clear about what has been said, I often paraphrase or restate the point that someone has just made by saying: “Let me see if I’m understanding you . . .” Or I may repeat what was said verbatim.

Sometimes you may encounter difficult situations or people when facilitating a meeting. Humor is one of the best ways of improving the tone of meetings. It makes meetings seem like friendly get-togethers. However, if a person is critical, you can try acknowledging the negative feelings while guiding the person to a more positive suggestion or outlook. Or when a group cannot reach an agreement or consensus, there are numerous techniques to try, such as summarizing the differences in points of view, then note where there is common ground and build from there.

A great facilitator is always appreciated and respected. You can learn more about facilitating by getting a good how-to book on the subject or taking a course. For instance, I graduated from Memorial University’s The Professional Facilitator Certificate Program a few years ago and found it very worthwhile. This five-day program is designed to meet the growing demand for skilled, effective session leaders and facilitators.

An effective facilitator can manage a group environment and find out what people really think. Understand the facilitation process and gain the practical skills needed to facilitate effectively.

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### **Facilitator’s Checklist**

- Identify the purpose (goal) of the meeting.
- Make sure the right people will be attending.
- Send invitation.
- Develop agenda.
- Prepare necessary materials, i.e. handouts, presentation.
- Double check the room set up: AV, refreshments
- Lead the meeting as a facilitator
- Agree on ground rules for the meeting, i.e no cell phones
- Foster participation
- Use consensus-building / decision making techniques
- Use facilitation techniques, i.e. flip charts, roundtable discussions
- Be prepared to handle conflict
- Ensure goals are met
- Communicate next steps
- Give the participants the final word
- Reflect on effectiveness of the meeting (evaluation)