

Facilitating a Meeting: What to Do

1. **PHYSICAL SPACE:** it is important to have a comfortable, well lit place for a meeting. Make sure that you have all the materials necessary for a successful meeting, i.e. newsprint, markers, nametags, refreshments.
2. **MEETING TONE:** usually set in the beginning. It's important to start on a note of confidence and energy and with the recognition that those present are people, not just roles and functions. Sometimes singing (if appropriate) will do this--especially in large gatherings, or a quick sharing of good things that have happened to individual people lately.
3. **AGENDA REVIEW:**
 - a. Go through the whole agenda in deadline form giving a brief idea of what is to be covered and how.
 - b. Briefly explain the rationale behind the order of the proposed agenda.
 - c. Then, ask for questions and comments. (not before)
 - d. Don't be defensive about the agenda you have proposed, but don't change everything about at the suggestion of one person--check it out with the group first. (you might want to come to the meeting with several alternatives of ways to proceed in your head)
 - e. If major additions are proposed make the group aware that adjustments must be made because of limited time available--take something out, postpone until later, etc.
 - f. If an item is suggested for discussion that some people do not want to deal with, consider that there is no consensus and it cannot be included at that time.
 - g. Remember, that your responsibility as facilitator is to the whole group and not to each individual.
 - h. When the agenda has been amended, ask the participants if they are willing to accept it -- and insist on a response. They need to be aware of having made a contract with you about how to proceed -- besides it is their meeting.
4. **AGENDA ITEMS PROPER:**
 - a. Arrange (before the meeting) to have somebody else handle each item.
 - b. Encourage the expression of various viewpoints -- the more important the decision, the more important it is to have all pertinent information (facts, feelings, and opinions) on the table.
 - c. Expect differences of opinions -- when handled well they can contribute greatly to creative solutions. (Don't loose your temper. stay cool)
 - d. Don't let discussion remain between two people. but ask for comments by others. After all, it is the group that needs to make the decisions and carry them out.
 - e. As much as possible, hold people to speaking for themselves only and to be specific when they refer to others. NO: "some people say...", "we all know", "they would not listen..." Even though this is scary in the beginning it will foster building of trust in the long run.
 - f. Keep looking for minor points of agreement and state them -- it helps morale.

- g. Encourage people to think of fresh solutions as well as to be looking for possible compromise.
- h. In tense situations or when solutions are hard to reach, remember humor, affirmation, quick games for energy, change of places, small buzz groups, silence, etc.
- i. When you test for consensus, state in question form everything that you feel participants agree upon. Be specific: "Do we agree that we'll meet on Tuesday evenings for the next two months and that a facilitator be found at each meeting to function for the next one?" Do NOT merely refer to a previous statement, such as: "Do you all agree that we should do it the way it was just suggested?"
- j. Insist on a response. Here again the participants need to be conscious of making a contract with each other.
- k. If you find yourself drawn into the discussion in support of a particular position, it would be preferable to step aside as facilitator until the next agenda item. This can be arranged beforehand if you anticipate a conflict or the co-facilitator can step in if one is designated.
- l. Most any meeting will benefit from quick breaks in the proceedings-- energy injections -- provided by short games, songs, a common stretch etc.

5. EVALUATION: In small meetings it is often wise to evaluate how things went. A simple format: On top of a large sheet of newsprint or a blackboard put a + on the left side, a - in the middle and a Δ (chance) on the right side. Under the + list positive comments, things that people felt good about. Under the - list the things that could have been done better, that did not come off so well. Under the Δ list specific suggestions for how things could have been improved. Other evaluation methods include: a. Go around the group asking for thoughts, feelings and impressions of the meeting (make sure it is OK for a member to "pass", if he or she does not wish to contribute at this time), b. ask for one word or short phrase reactions of members, or c. prepare a written evaluation or ask members to write down their feelings and thoughts.

Don't get into arguments about whether something was in fact helpful or not--people have a right to their own feelings. It is not necessary to work out consensus about what was good and what was was not about the meeting.

A few minutes is usually all that is needed--don't draw it out. Try to end with a positive comment.

Meetings almost invariably get better after people get used to evaluating how they function together.

- 6. CLOSING: Try to end the meeting in the same way it started -- with a sense of gathering. Don't let it just fizzle. A song, some silence, standing in a circle, shaking hands -- anything that affirms the group as such and puts a feeling of closure on the time spent together.
- 7. SOCIAL GATHERING: Sometimes it is pleasant to plan some social time before or after the meeting where people can relax, gather and eat. A social time adds another dimension to your group or organization, making it more than a work or business meeting.

DECISION MAKING

We all have to make many decisions every day of our lives, and many of these decisions usually involve or affect other people. Our decisions may take many forms -- rendering an opinion, making a specific recommendation, giving a solution for a concrete problem, defining courses of action, handing down a verdict, stating a general policy, etc. These may be evaluated in terms of content, or what decision was made. Is it valid? Does it make sense? Or it may be evaluated in terms of process, how it was made. Were the people who had the information needed involved? Were those who would be affected involved? Did all participants really agree? Were alternatives considered? What would be the effect on the people who must carry out the decision? A mistake we frequently make is to look only at the content, whereas the adequacy of the decision, in terms of the support it will receive, depends in large measure on the process, how it was made.

Following is a short description of different kinds of decisions based on the way they are made.

1. PLOP: A plop results when a group member makes a suggestion which meets with no response from the group as a whole. It falls, "plop". Not only is there no recognition or evaluation of the suggestion by the group, but the individual who offered the suggestion feels he or she has been ignored and possibly rejected. He or she feels that no one will listen.
2. SELF AUTHORIZED DECISIONS: This occurs when a group member suggests a course of action and immediately proceeds upon that course on the assumption that since no one disagreed, the group has given its approval. Such action can frequently lead a group down blind alleys. Even if the rest of the group agree with the decision, they may resent the way it was made and no one knows how much support the decision will receive from the other members of the group.
3. HANDCLASP: A suggestion made by one member elicits a reaction of support and permission to proceed from another. The group is launched into action without adequate testing as to whether the proposal is acceptable to the group as a whole. The handclasp between two or three is evident in cliques that form within the group and is a powerful method of control of the group. It often results from the failure of some members to meet their responsibility to the group by speaking up, voicing their opinion, keeping the group on target, and insuring that alternatives are considered.
4. MINORITY SUPPORT: A minority of the group ramrods a decision or suggestion into group action which the majority does not support. This leads to little future support by the group as a whole for the action taken.
5. MAJORITY SUPPORT: A common method of determining a majority support decision is by voting. Many groups make the mistake of assuming that simply because a majority supports the decision, the minority will come along willingly. Often they may appear to do so, but frequently they resent the action and give no more than token support.

This may lead to "dragging of feet" or to sabotaging of the decision. The basic assumption underlying majority procedures appears to be "the majority is always right, and the minority should conform." This usually results in failure to explore ideas and alternative courses of action or to make effective use of the views and experience of the minority. Instead something is suggested and a vote is called for before other ideas have an opportunity to be heard and explored.

6. **PROBLEM CONSENSUS:** The group produces as many alternatives as it can (through brainstorming or any other method) to be evaluated later. These can serve as the basis for interacting. Such procedure can lead to the suggestion of varied and creative ideas that might otherwise not be considered. Withholding evaluation gives an individual an opportunity and sometimes the courage to make a suggestion or submit an idea, engenders the feeling of support and cohesiveness, and gives greater assurance that the idea will be given adequate consideration.
7. **NEAR CONSENSUS:** Groups which really try to avoid the pitfalls associated with the prop, self-authorized, handclasp, minority, or majority decisions often try to include every member in the final decision by refusing to accept a decision until it is supported by all members. All members may agree, but some may have reservations regarding the decision or may display obvious displeasure. Support and satisfaction are higher than under the other procedures, however, but the dissenting members, although promising support, often withdraw support at crucial times, such as when the decision is implemented, thus leading to failure of the undertaking.
8. **THOUGHT AND FEELING CONSENSUS:** All members have contributed to the decision or feel that their contributions have been given a fair hearing, and are more satisfied with it than with any of the other alternatives which were considered. Each individual has had an opportunity to voice his or her opinions, ideas and reservations and is satisfied with the treatment these have received. Under this procedure, the probability is greater that a decision will emerge which has given proper weight to the significant conditions affecting the decision and as such gains greater combined support from all members of the group.

A Description of a Model for Consensus Decision-Making

Consensus is a word built on the roots "con" meaning "with, together, jointly, thoroughly" and "sensus" meaning "feel, perceive, mean"; the process of consensus decision-making has many variations and a long history. Looking into its past and present uses, we can see that it has been most productively and creatively used when the group using it has a high degree of unity. This indicates two steps. First, the principles which unite the group must themselves be arrived at by consensus: each member of the group is crucial to the process and needs a strong feeling of attitudes shared with the rest of the group members in order to act creatively and productively in the meeting. Second, the principles which unite the group must themselves be strong principles. The bonds which hold the members together need to be more important to each member than the disagreements and tensions which will be brought out during the decision making; if they are not powerful enough in their cohesive influence, the group may fail, individuals may feel forced to leave, or the process may become destructive rather than positive. Political unity on principles which form a groundwork for each person's life will ensure the continuation of open, cooperative action in the group.

Consensus is a process of building up united judgement. An individual speaks in response to an idea introduced by another person; his/her statements are a combination of his/her opinions and those of the previous speaker. A following speaker's contribution is now different than if the two previous persons had not spoken.

At some point in this process, the facilitator expresses what he/she perceives is the sense of the meeting. The people in the meeting respond by expressing agreement or disagreement.

This process of building united judgement continues until the "sense" as expressed by one or more individuals is endorsed by the meeting as a whole.

It may be different positions come into or are developed in the discussion. It is possible that none of these positions is right but that the perceptions of all will lead to the right decision. Each point of view may have adherents, yet everyone needs to remember his/her responsibilities to the group as a whole. Each position has the responsibility to present facts and perceptions which are not being considered, to explain the position as clearly and rationally as possible, and to question the other positions so as to reach full understanding of their position. Any position can keep the question open, even if it appears to be in the minority. A minority that develops has a special responsibility to point out the shortcomings of the majority position; the majority has a special responsibility to answer all the misgivings of the minority on the question and to assure them that the question will continue to be re-evaluated. In general it is best to beware of the concepts of minority/majority, and of the overall idea of "taking sides" as they tend to block our minds from seeking creative, all-encompassing decisions.

This does not mean acceptance of a cheap compromise of the lowest common denominator, nor does it always mean complete unanimity. The purpose is not to avoid conflict, but to bring out all opinions and perspectives. Agreement is reached after all the facts and reasons are explored, and after all perceptions are expressed, discussed and understood, at which time a position based on rational thinking and objective judgement is able to be accepted by the group.

If this agreement does not evolve at a meeting, the group must choose between; a. the importance of reaching a decision at this particular time, or b. a recognition that the issue is so fundamentally significant in terms of the philosophical, political principles of the group, that the question is deferred to a later time. In the first case, the minority must give up their demands, in the interests of unity and recognition of the importance of action. In the second case, there is a realization that the question is so important as to demand complete understanding and agreement from everyone. Holders of all positions will be given time to re-evaluate on the basis of further information, perceptions, discussion, and thinking, toward the development of greater understanding of the issue.

The strength of consensus depends upon the depth of understanding of the subject, the strength of agreement among the participants, and the proportion of members who participate.

Some Guidelines for Reaching Consensus

1. Avoid arguing for your own ideas. Present your position as lucidly and logically as possible, but listen to the other members' reactions and consider them carefully before you press your point.
2. When coming to a decision use an explicitly stated (and if possible) written down proposal for consideration.
3. Provide explicit time for questions of clarification with regard to the proposal. Don't allow this time to turn into debate, lobbying, proposal of alternatives, etc.
4. Do not assume that someone must win and someone must lose when discussion reaches a stalemate. Instead, look for the next-most-acceptable alternative for all parties.
5. Distinguish between major objections and friendly amendments. A major objection is a fundamental disagreement with the core of the proposal. A friendly amendment is a modification or addition to some, as part of the proposal but which does not change the core of the proposal.
6. In case of major objections the proposal should receive additional work before again being considered by the total group. This work should include supporters of the original proposal as well as individuals with major objections and should result in a revised proposal to be brought back to the group.
7. In the case of friendly amendments a list of all such amendments should be made prior to discussion. Each amendment should be dealt with one at a time with opportunity for clarifying questions.
8. Do not change your mind simply to avoid conflict and to reach agreement and harmony, when agreement seems to come too quickly and easily, be suspicious, explore the reasons and be sure everyone accepts the solution for basically similar or complementary reasons. Yield only to positions that have objective and logically sound foundations.
9. Avoid conflict-reducing techniques such as majority vote, averages, and bargaining. When a dissenting member finally agrees, don't feel that he/she must be rewarded by having his/her own way on some later point.
10. Differences of opinion are natural and expected. Seek them out and try to involve everyone in the decision process. Disagreements can help the group's decision because with a wide range of information and opinions, there is a greater chance that the group will hit upon more adequate solutions.
11. Decision making through consensus involves discussion and accountability of viewpoints as opposed to power struggles. Postponement of decisions to give time to reconsider and recognize that all people participating are able to accept and work with the decision is vital to the consensus process.
12. Be sure and write down the decision at the time it is made to make sure everyone agrees on the same thing and to insure a record which can be subsequently referred to.