

Meeting Facilitation

The No-Magic Method

Meetings are occasions when people come together to get something done, whether it is sharing information or making decisions. They may be good, bad or indifferent.

Some of the ingredients of good meetings are:

- ▶ Commonly understood goals
- ▶ A clear process for reaching those goals
- ▶ An awareness that people come with their personal pre-occupations and feelings as well as an interest in the subject at hand
- ▶ A sense of involvement and empowerment, people feeling that the decisions are their decisions, that they are able to do what needs doing.

While there is no foolproof way to insure successful meetings, there are a number of guidelines that will go a long way toward helping groups to meet both joyfully and productively. Most people can learn how to facilitate a good meeting, but it does take some time and attention. The more people within a group who are aware of good group process skills, the easier the task of the facilitator and the more satisfactory the meeting.

A facilitator is not quite the same as a leader or a chairperson, but more like a clerk in a Quaker meeting. A facilitator accepts responsibility to help the group accomplish a common task: to move through the agenda in the time available and to make necessary decisions and plans for Implementation.

A facilitator makes no decisions for the group, but suggests ways that will help the group to move forward. He or she works in such a way that the people present at the meeting are aware that they are in charge, that it is their business that is being conducted, and that each person has a role to play.

It is important to emphasize that the responsibility of the facilitator is to the group and its work rather than to the individuals within the group.

Furthermore, a person with a high stake in the issues discussed will have a more difficult task functioning as a good facilitator.

Agenda Planning

If at all possible, plan the agenda before this meeting. It is easier to modify it later than to start from scratch at the beginning of the meeting. If very few agenda items are known before the meeting starts, try to anticipate by thinking about the people who will be there and what kind of process will be helpful to them.

In the agenda include:

1. Something to gather people, to bring their thoughts to the present, to make them recognize each other's presence (singing, silence, brief mention of good things that have happened to people lately, etc.)
2. Agenda review—it's a good idea to have the agenda written on large sheets of newsprint or on a blackboard, so that everybody can see it. By reviewing the agenda the facilitator can give the participants a chance to modify the proposed agenda and then to contract to carry it out.
3. Main items—if more than one item needs to be dealt with it is important to set priorities.
 - ▶ If at all possible, start with something, which can be dealt with reasonably easily. This will give the group a sense of accomplishment and energy
 - ▶ The more difficult or lengthier items, or those of most pressing importance, come next. If there are several, plan to have quick breaks between them to restore energy and attention (just a stretch in place, a rousing song, and a quick game.)
 - ▶ A big item may be broken into several issues and discussed one at a time to make it more manageable. Or it may be helpful to suggest a process of presenting the item with background information and clarification, breaking into small groups for idea sharing and making priorities, and

then returning to the main group for discussion.

- ▶ Finish with something short and easy to provide a sense of hope for next time.
4. Announcements
 5. Evaluation—serves several purposes: to provide a quick opportunity for people to express their feelings about the proceedings and thus to provide a sense of closure to the experience; and to learn to have better meetings in the future. Estimate the time needed for each item and put it on the agenda charts.

This will:

- ▶ Indicate to participants the relative weights of the items.
- ▶ Help participants tailor their participation to the time available
- ▶ Give a sense of the progress of the meeting.

The tone of a meeting is usually set on 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 will do this—especially in large gatherings— or a quick sharing of good things which have happened to individual people lately. The time it takes is repaid by the contribution it makes to a relaxed and upbeat atmosphere where participants are encouraged to be real with each other.

Agenda Review

1. Go through the whole agenda in headline form giving a brief idea of what is to be covered and how.
2. Briefly explain the rationale behind the order of the proposed agenda.
3. Then, and not before, ask for questions and comments.
4. Don't be defensive about the agenda you have proposed, but don't change everything at the suggestion of one person—check it out with the group first.
5. If major additions are proposed, make the group aware that adjustments must be made because of limited time available, like taking

something out, postponing something until later, etc.

6. If an item that some people do not want to deal with is suggested for discussion, consider that there is no consensus and it cannot be included at that time.
7. Remember that your responsibility as facilitator is to the whole group and not to each individual.
8. 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!

Agenda Items Proper

1. Arrange (before the meeting) to have somebody else present each item.
2. 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.
3. Expect differences of opinion— when handled well, they can contribute greatly to creative solutions.
4. Be suspicious of agreements reached too easily—test to make sure that people really do agree on essential points
5. Don't let discussion continue 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.
6. As much as possible, hold people to speaking for themselves only and to being 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
7. Keep looking for minor points of agreement and state them—it helps morale.
8. Encourage people to think of fresh solutions as well as to look for possible compromises.
9. 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.

10. When you test for consensus, state in question form everything that you feel participants agree on. Be specific: "Do we agree that we'll meet on Tuesday evenings for the next two months and that a facilitator will be found at each meeting to function for the next one?" Do NOT merely refer to a previous statement: "Do you all agree that we should do it the way it was just suggested?"
11. Insist on a response. Here again the participants need to be conscious of making a contract with each other.
12. 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 of interest.
13. Almost any meeting will benefit from quick breaks in the proceedings—energy injections—provided by short-games/ songs, a common stretch, etc.

Evaluation

In small meetings (up to 50 people at least) it is often wise to evaluate how things went (the meeting process, that is, not the content). 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 / on the right side. Under the + list positive comments, things that people felt good about. Under the list things that could have been done better, that did not come off so well. Under the / list specific suggestions for how things could have been improved. Don't get into arguments about whether something was in fact helpful or not; people have a right to their feelings. It is not necessary to work out consensus on what was good and what was not about the meeting.

A few minutes is usually all that is needed—don't drag it out. Try to end with a positive comment. Meetings almost invariably get better after people get used to evaluating how they function together.

Closing

Try to end the meeting in the same way it was started—with a sense of gathering. Don't let it just fizzle. A song, some silence, standing in a circle, shaking hands—anything which affirms the groups as such and puts a feeling of closure on the time spent together is good.

"Vibes Watcher"

At times when the discussion is expected to be particularly controversial, or when there are more people than the facilitator can be aware attentive to it may make sense to appoint a "vibes watcher"—a person who will pay attention to the emotional climate and energy level of the attendees. Such a person is encouraged to interrupt the proceedings when necessary with an observation of how things are going and to suggest remedies when there is a problem.

As "vibes watcher" you pay most attention to the nonverbal communication, such as:

- ▶ Body languages are people yawning/ dozing, sagging, fidgeting, leaving?
- ▶ Facial expressions; are people alert or "not there", looking upset, staring off into space?
- ▶ Side conversations: are they distracting to the facilitator or to the group?
- ▶ People interrupting each other.

It is often difficult to interpret such behavior correctly. Therefore it may be wise to report what you observed and possibly suggest something to do about it. If energy is low a quick game, stretch, or a rousing song may wake people up. If tension or conflict level is preventing people from hearing each other, a simple getting up and finding new places to sit might help. A period of silence might also be helpful when people may have a chance to relax a bit and look for new insights.

It is important for the vibes watcher to keep a light touch—don't make people feel guilty or defensive. Also, be confident in your role—there is no reason for apologizing when you have an observation or a suggestion for the group. You are doing them a favor.

Process Observer

From time to time any group can benefit from having somebody observe how it works. During periods of conflict or transition (changing consciousness about sexism, for example) a process observer may be of special value.

While functioning as a process observer be careful not to get involved in the task of the group. A notepad for short notations will help you to be accurate. Remember to notice helpful suggestions or procedure that moved the group forward. Once a group has a sense of its strengths it is easier to consider the need for improvements.

Here are some specific things you might look for:

1. What was the general atmosphere in which the group worked? relaxed? tense?
2. How were the decisions made?
3. If there was any conflict, how was it handled?
4. Did everybody participate? Were there procedures that encouraged participation?
5. How well did the group members listen to each other?
6. Were there recognized leaders within the group?
7. How did the group interact with this facilitator?
8. Were there differences between male and female participation?

When you as process observer (whether appointed or not) are paying specific attention to patterns of participation, an easy device would be to keep score on papers. In a small group a mark can be made next to a person's name every time s/he speaks. If you are looking for differences in participation patterns between categories of people, such as male-female, blackwhite, new members-old member, etc, keeping track of number of contributions in each category is enough.

In giving feedback to the group try to be matter of fact and specific so that people do not get

defensive and can know exactly what you are talking about. Again, remember to mention the strengths you observed in the group. If you take it upon yourself to function as a process observer without checking with the group beforehand, be prepared for some hostility. Your contribution may turn out to be very valuable, but a lot of tact and sensitivity is called for.

Co-Facilitator

Instead of the usual practice of having one facilitator it is often wise to have two facilitators. Here are some of the reasons and circumstances for team facilitation:

1. More information and ideas are available during the planning.
2. More energy (physical and emotional) is available to the group—especially during times of conflict or when handling complicated matters.
3. If a facilitator becomes personally involved in the discussion, it is easy to hand the job over to the co-facilitator for the time being.
4. Co-facilitation is a way for more people to gain experience and become skilled facilitators.
5. It is less exhausting, demanding, and scary.

For people who are not used to working as a team it is probably wise to divide responsibility for the agenda clearly before the meeting. However, co-facilitation means that the person

who is not currently "on duty" is still responsible for paying attention as "vibes watcher" and pitching in to help clarify issues, test for consensus, etc.

In evaluating their work together, people who work as co-facilitators can help each other by giving feedback and support, and thus learn to grow.

By Berit Lakey, reprinted with permission