

Tips & Tricks for Meeting Facilitation

As the meeting facilitator, you have a couple of specific jobs to help create a successful meeting. Here are a few facilitation techniques you can use on the spot to make sure you're running a great meeting.

Job 1: Soliciting Everyone's Voice.

One of your primary jobs as the facilitator is to ensure all voices are heard. Generally speaking, in a great meeting, everyone has spoken and participated about the same amount as everyone else.

Be aware of individuals who talk too much and take over the conversation. Also be aware of people who hold back and seem to want to fade into the background.

If somebody is talking a lot:

- » If they ask a question, ask the rest of the group their thoughts on that question. Say: "These are great points. I would love to hear what others think."
- » If you have a feeling you have a talker in your group, start the meeting by saying: "We have a full agenda today. We want to hear everyone's opinions, so please try to be succinct when you contribute." You may even joke about how you will "crack the whip" to ensure all meeting objectives are met.

If you have quiet folks who haven't spoken up:

- » Be aware that people refrain from contributing for a whole host of reasons. They may be shy. They may not feel comfortable in English. Perhaps they don't know a lot about the discussion topic, and they don't feel they have much to add. Or maybe they're tired or preoccupied with something outside of the meeting.
- » Say generally to the group: "There are a few folks we haven't heard from yet. Would anyone who hasn't had the chance to speak like to add their thoughts?"
- » Try not to put people on the spot too much. It's ok to push folks lightly out of their comfort zone by saying, for example: "Jane, we haven't heard from you yet. Is there anything you would like to add?" Or you can be specific to give them a starting point and ask: "Jane, what are your thoughts on Rashid's question?" If someone has a specific expertise, you can say: "I would really like to hear Jane's thoughts on this topic. She understands the ins-and-outs of this issue really well." Setting up your comment in this way gives the person a few seconds to prepare their thoughts.
- » If people are more comfortable offering feedback in a different way, create those avenues for them. For example, some people are more comfortable speaking with fewer eyes on them, so ask the group to "Pair and Share" by spending a few minutes talking to their neighbor or in small groups about the discussion topic. Alternatively, you can ask everyone to spend a few minutes writing their individual thoughts down on paper and then go around the room to share ideas.
- » If people are still not responding, consider speaking to them individually after the meeting and letting them know the group would really like to hear their thoughts. Ask them if there is a different way they would like to contribute their opinion (over email, through edits to plans, etc.).

Job 2: Achieving the Meeting Objectives.

Another primary goal for the meeting facilitator is to get through the agenda and achieve all the meeting objectives.

First, make sure the meeting's objectives are achievable!

- » Before the meeting, think through the agenda and make sure you have everything you need to achieve the objectives. For example, is there certain information or data you need to make a decision? Does a certain person need to be present? Is there a facilitation technique or voting technique you need to have prepared?
 - One great tool is a Facilitator's Agenda, which looks like the agenda you hand out to meeting participants but has more information about the details of what needs to be covered, facilitation techniques to employ, and materials needed. In Coalitions Lite, this is called the Facilitator Guide.
- » Start out every meeting with a review of the agenda and meeting objectives. Remind the group that your goal is to continue moving forward to accomplish the full agenda. Ask the group if they're on board with that agenda.
- » Name a timekeeper to keep the group on track.
- » Sometimes halfway through the meeting, you realize you may have bit off more than you can chew. Be careful about sacrificing group cohesion or other meeting objectives just to stick to the schedule. Pivot if you need to.

If the group starts to go off the agenda:

Discussions will always get off point; it's the facilitator's job to think about the best way forward.

- » Most ideas can be discussed and decided later in another meeting, over email, or with a smaller team. This is especially true for items that are set to be on a future meeting's agenda. For example, you are looking through data to set your priorities and somebody starts throwing out ideas for how to solve that problem. Thank them for their ideas then remind them that the group will discuss strategies in a later meeting. Right now, you need to focus on setting priorities.
- » For other sidetrack thoughts that do not need to be solved right then, set up a blank flip chart page labeled "Parking Lot" or ask the notetaker to capture "parking lot" topics for a later time. Write the discussion topic or question raised on the flip chart to be addressed at another time. Just be sure to come back to it at later!
- » You could also suggest another way of resolving the topic. For example: "Great point, Ana. Do you think you can get with Isabel after the meeting and come up with a solution?"
- » Sometimes issues are brought up that need to be dealt with on the spot. This may mean you have to pivot your agenda. That's okay – as long as it's intentional and agreed-upon. In such a case,
 - Step 1: Be aware of the conversation enough to sense whether this might be an issue that the group needs to discuss right now. Perhaps the issue needs resolution in order to accomplish your other goals. Perhaps it's sensitive and the group won't be able to move past it without immediate resolution.

- Step 2: Ask the group: “This topic feels like something we may need to agree upon before we can move on with the agenda. What do you all think? Should we pivot our meeting agenda to talk about this now? Or parking lot it for later?”
- Step 3: You may want to conduct a Thumb Vote to ensure everyone gets a say.
- Step 4: Restate the issue clearly to the group in a way that sets the discussion up for a decision, or at least to agree upon next steps. “My understanding of this issue is” “The decision we need to make right now is....” “Is this a fair description of what we need to discuss?”
- After the discussion, decide how the group will get back to the original agenda objectives. Do you need to schedule another meeting? Can you punt some of the objectives to email or a smaller team?