Making Meetings More Meaningful

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Introduction

Meetings have a reputation for wasting time and energy and being generally unproductive. They are seen as a required task with no alternative but to bear the mundane activity. Meetings don’t have to be like this. This paper includes tips for running meetings, dealing with problem meeting participants, the new theory of meeting facilitation, consensus-building as well as challenges that accompany new meeting technologies.

Meeting facilitation is an important skill to have. No organization can function without meetings, so whether you are the director or an entry-level staff person you will be involved in meetings. “Experts say that business people – IT leaders included – generally don’t run productive meetings” (Pratt 2005). The definition of facilitate in the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary is “to make easier: help bring about.” Facilitation skills can be applied in many situations, not only in conventional meetings. Facilitation skills are useful in job interviews and negotiations of any kind. Whether you are negotiation with a colleague or with another whole organization.

Tips for improving your meetings

Having a facilitator at a meeting can make or break the meeting. A facilitator keeps everyone on track and conversation flowing. They assure that the meetings are productive. They also can assure that the meeting is nonbiased. It is very difficult for a boss to run his/her own meeting and be unbiased when they have something invested in the meeting (Doyle 1976). If possible, bringing a facilitator from outside your organization or at least outside your department is the best option. Usually for smaller
meeting such as weekly staff meetings supervisors have to facilitate their own meetings. The same rules and suggestions apply to them as to an outside facilitator.

Joan Eisenstodt gives six traits or skills for effective facilitators in her article *Guide to Good Facilitation* (2005). One of those traits is **curiosity**. The facilitator needs to ask questions and make clarifying statements like “I think what I heard was…” The facilitator also needs to **be a good listener** and **seek input from everyone** there. They should occasionally go around the room and ask for input by name. This prevents the strong personalities from dominating the discussion, allowing everyone to speak. Another skill is **avoiding negative conversation stoppers** such as “you’re kidding” or any other phrase that invalidates a comment by someone else. They should use **positive language** instead like “tell us more.”

**Agendas** are one of the most important aspects of a successful meeting. When creating an agenda facilitators should go thought it and make sure that all things on the agenda really need to be discussed at the meeting. If certain items only require the attention of two people in a meeting of ten people, those items should be taken off. If they are discussed at the meeting it wastes the other eight peoples time who aren’t involved and should be discussed later. Agendas need to be sent ahead of time so people are aware of what to expect and why they are there. Also, each agenda item needs to be allotted a time. If an item is going over the time allotted for it, it is a good idea to put it in a “parking lot.” This is a flip chart or someone taking notes that indicates although there isn’t time to cover this item now it will be addressed at a later date. This is also good for tangents that might come up during the meeting. Instead of going off on a tangent, focus on the meeting at hand and schedule the tangent to be discussed at a later date.
One thing that needs to be done before the meeting is **stating the reasons for the meeting**. This can be through an e-mail asking for attendance, or it can be spelled out in the agenda. The important thing here is to be sure everyone knows why he or she is there. They need to know they are important and the meeting is not wasting their time. If a participant thinks he/she is wasting their time he or she won’t be a productive asset to the meeting. One suggestion is at the beginning of the meeting ask someone to share why they are here with the group. This will assure “buy in” of the meeting.

As the facilitator you need to **concentrate on what you want to achieve**. It is like riding a bike. If you’re looking at the road ahead of you, you will go in the right direction. If you are gazing off to the side of the road, chances are you will end up in the gutter. Everyone needs to be aware of the goals and outcomes that are the expected results of the meeting. Listing them on the agenda is a surefire way to make everyone aware of the goals of the meeting. Although this might be putting people on the spot, one tactic is to test people’s commitment to the meeting and understanding of the goals by asking questions about the goals. This will not only help the facilitator know who has done their homework but also it might give others a better understanding of what the goals are.

**Rules for the meeting** need to be established ahead of time. It is always good to refresh everyone’s memory of the rules before the meeting, especially if there are newcomers or guests. The rules could be that you follow Robert’s Rules of Order or your organization might have its own set of rules or traditions it follows. The norms need to be known and accepted by all. If you have people in your group who are outspoken it is
good to have a rule of raise your hand or some other action to signal the facilitator that you want to talk.

**Timeliness** is an important aspect of running a meeting. This includes starting the meeting on time as well as keeping the meeting within its time constraints. It is better that somebody other than the facilitator keep time and remind the facilitator when time is up for discussing a particular topic. The facilitator can then signpost throughout the meeting. **Signposting** is giving a short overview of what has been accomplished, where we are on the agenda and what needs to be covered next.

If you are a participant of the meeting, not the facilitator, there are still important things to take into consideration. First, **know your role**. Facilitators don’t usually contribute to the content of the meeting whereas that is a participant’s main goal. If you are a participant it is important to come to the meeting with a positive attitude and the required knowledge to contribute effectively. One good tip is to come to the meeting with questions and comments prepared.

**Problem Participants**

Dealing with people is an important skill of facilitators. In *How to Make Meetings Work* Michael Doyle and David Straus write about how to deal with problem people (Doyle 1976). In chapter six they give examples of specific types of problem participants and how to deal with each one. They also give four steps for how to deal with problem participants in general. Those four steps are accept, legitimize, defer and graduated response.

The first step, accepting the problem is to stop ignoring the problem participants behavior and acknowledging it exists in a non judgmental way. In the situation of a
loudmouth participant who is dominating the meeting this could be stating what their problem is out loud. This is important because you may be off in your assumption of what the participant has a problem with. This assures you are on the same page about what the issue may be.

The second step is to legitimize. Let the person know you are aware that they think whatever it is that they do. It may even help to thank them for raising doubts about the discussion because it helps you take every aspect into consideration. The third step is to defer the problem. Sometimes it is better to discuss the issue outside of the meeting. If this is the case make sure the issue is recorded in the meeting minutes and then the solution found is addressed at the next meeting.

The fourth step, graduated response, is used in the case where the problem participant won’t let the issue be deferred. Graduated response is first trying a low-key approach and gradually getting more confrontational if the low-key approach doesn’t work. In the same situation as mentioned before, the loudmouth, the first thing to do would be to thank them for talking then call on someone else to speak. If this doesn’t work the next thing would be to move physically in their space, look at them and say everyone heard his or her comments, then ask someone else to speak. The third thing is to confront the person outside the meeting. Talk to them during a break or if this person is continually disrupting regular staff meetings talk to them directly after the latest meeting about his or her disruption. If this still doesn’t work, confronting the person in front of the group is the next step. This way other participants can share their feelings about the disruptive participant. This allows the disruptive person to not only know that the
facilitator doesn’t like their behavior but that the other participants don’t like it as well.

This uses humiliation to get the point across and should be the last resort.

**Consensus-Building**

Consensus-building is an emerging theory for approaching meetings and an alternative to Robert’s Rules of Order, which is rule set that most groups follow. The aspects of the rules that are most common are: motions are made and seconded and decisions are made by majority rule vote (Susskind 2005). Majority rule method doesn’t serve groups particularly well. If you use majority rule method in your meetings there is for sure going to be a minority that is unhappy with the decision. The result of consensus-building is a decision that is very close to unanimous.

Lawrence Susskind lays out five steps to consensus-building in his article *Breaking Robert’s Rules: Consensus-Building Techniques for Group Decision Making* (2005). The first step is convening the group. This step requires someone Susskind calls a convener. A convener is someone with authority who initiates the meeting. The convener can be a director who gives a manager a project where a meeting is needed, or it could be the manager who tells everyone where to be and when. After initiating the meeting the convener asks someone to facilitate. An outside facilitator, through interviews and other channels of communication like e-mail, can accomplish a significant amount of groundwork before the meeting that can make the meeting run more smoothly.

The second step in consensus-building is clarifying responsibilities. This is a major difference from Roberts Rules of Order. Here everyone must be aware that not only they are responsible to formulate suggestions and solutions that meet their needs but be prepared to take into consideration everyone’s needs at the table. In consensus-
building if a person disagrees with an idea or solution it is their responsibility to propose another solution, not only that benefits them, but also benefits the others involved. The purpose of consensus-building is unanimity but overwhelming agreement is acceptable.

The third step is implementing the decision. In order to reach a consensus everyone’s voice must be hear. That is why brainstorming is so important. During brainstorming it is important that everyone understand the purpose of the meeting and that consensus-building is about maximizing joint gains, not winning or loosing.

The fourth step, reaching a decision, can be more complicated than the Robert’s Rules of Order method. Instead of voting on the solution or proposal the question is asked “Who can’t live with this.” If someone can’t live with it they are responsible for coming up with a better solution. This kind of decision takes a considerable amount of time more that a majority vote but in the end it is very rewarding. People must come with a win-win attitude. Not only do they want to look for a result that will help them but also one that will help other people as well. The fifth step of consensus-building is implement the decision. This method of decision-making doesn’t end and the conclusion of the meeting. It requires that the group meet after the decision has been implemented to discuss any unexpended occurrences.

Consensus-building is much more time consuming that the majority rule method so why do it? There is more legitimacy in a unanimous decision than a majority decision. Staff will feel more valued since their opinion and preferences really do matter in this case. This method keeps the playing ground even by avoiding letting the majority rule because sometimes the majority isn’t right.
Digital Meetings

In this day and age there are many alternatives to face-to-face meetings. The most common of those is conference calls. There are also other emerging technologies like video conferencing. These alternatives to face-to-face meetings are good because they save staff travel time and money (Pratt 2005). Conference calls can be especially useful in places like Hawaii where travel to or from the islands can be very expensive and time consuming. The rules for face-to-face meetings apply to conference calls and video conferencing but there are a few other things a facilitator needs to keep in mind when having one of these kinds of meetings.

When facilitating a conference call it is imperative that you distribute the agenda ahead of time. If someone is calling into the meeting they may not be at their desk where they can immediately access e-mail. It is one of the great things about conference calls. You can participate in them from home, from the airport or wherever you need to be at that time. Ahead of time for face-to-face meetings could be as late as the morning for an afternoon meeting. For conference calls, however, agendas need to be distributed at least the day before if not a few days prior to the meeting (Pratt 2005).

Some important rules or protocol during a conference call is that you ask each person to state their name before talking. Depending on how many people are voices can be hard to distinguish. Another important rule is ask people to mute the phone while drinking eating or when they step away from their desk. This is the downside to being able to be anywhere when calling into a conference call or web meeting. They might not be aware of it but some organizations if you put your phone on hold music plays, which
can interrupt a meeting. Many people, especially those new to conference calls aren’t aware of these rules of etiquette so it is good to either distribute the rules with the agenda or announce them at the beginning of the conference call.

Besides conference calls, there are other digital formats for meetings. About five years ago Ronald Berman used the phone lines and a shared electronic whiteboard to conduct a meeting (Pratt 2005). He connected ten people and they all contributed to the meeting via phone and the whiteboard. Also, video conferencing is becoming more popular as technology is becoming available.

One of the challenges of digital meetings is the distractions. When people aren’t face to face it is even easier to get distracted by a PDA or by checking e-mail. This can lead to inefficient use of time. In my personal experience at my last workplace we had frequent conference calls. Many of the participants would call in from home. There are so many distractions in the home such as T.V., doorbell, family members and pets that it can harm the productiveness of the meeting. It is okay to ask these “drifters” to concentrate on the meeting. Their behavior is not only keeping them from participating but can also distract others.

It is common during conference calls to have people inadvertently talking over one another. So during conference calls and video conferencing one good thing to do is repeat important comments or conclusions to make sure everyone heard. Another challenge of video conferencing is the presenter or facilitator might not be familiar with the technology they are using. This can be very harmful to the meeting if either the facilitator doesn’t know how to use the software or is uncomfortable and can’t run a
smooth meeting. If you are the facilitator it is good to do a practice run through of the meeting with the technology that you are going to be using.

**Conclusion**

Facilitation skills don’t come overnight. They take practice and experience. The pointers described in this paper will give you a good head start on honing your facilitation skills. Basic facilitation skills can be used in a variety of situations. Whether you are the director of an organization or if you are entry level staff they are a must have. If you are looking for a job, with these skills you can become more marketable. If you are already in a position these skills will make you more of an asset to your organization. My advice to you is to stop dreading meetings and get as much facilitation experience as possible.
Works Cited


Pratt, Mary K. “Meeting of the Minds: Running a good virtual meeting takes more than technology.” *Computerworld* (September 2005).