MEETING FACILITATION PRE-PLANNING, ASSESSMENT, and SCOPING

A great meeting is more than just what happens during the actual meeting.

Truly great, results-focused and successful meetings are greater than 50% planning. Meetings that don't work are often not simply the result of an unskilled facilitator, but victims of poor planning and assessment.

A facilitator or facilitation team should spend *at least* as much time as the meeting is scheduled for to plan the meeting. That means, for a day-long meeting, there is *at least* eight hours of work that should go into planning it.

Pre-planning and Assessment Activities include:

1. *Determining if the meeting is necessary*: many meetings simply don't need to happen, as a simple decision can save everyone some time and energy
2. *Understanding the background and context for the meeting*: some time spent doing research and understanding the background of the organization or issue central to the meeting helps meeting facilitation tremendously—you don't need to be an expert, but you should be familiar with terminology, history and organizational issues that might arise
3. *Clarifying goals, and ensuring they are realistic*: includes setting an appropriate amount of time for the meeting, or paring down desired outcomes to fit time available.
4. *Determining appropriate involvement*: who should be attending this meeting, are there people being left out who are critical participants, and/or are there people involved who don't need to be?
5. *Interviewing key stakeholders/meeting participants*: spending even 5-10 minutes on the phone or face-to-face with each person (or a reasonable proportion) attending the meeting can help establish rapport and provides a greater context for other individual or organizational issues that might be at work
6. *If appropriate, surveying others in addition to meeting participants*: for a strategy meeting, for instance, this may be an important step in providing some outside data for meeting participants to consider
7. *Crafting a clear agenda*: setting up a well-structured road map for the group is vital, and ideally others will be able to review and provide feedback before the meeting—a good agenda should outline time for each topic, a clear description of each topic, and desired outcomes for the meeting and/or topics; there may also be other notes for facilitators around process or materials needed
8. *Checking for agreement about the desired outcomes and agenda structure with participants before the meeting takes place*
9. *Determining appropriate location and other logistics*: ensuring that you have a logistics person within the company, or working with you to secure space, copy or collect materials needed, and order necessary refreshments
10. *Being aware of potential pitfalls, sticking points, or challenges before starting the meeting*: knowing what might await during a meeting is better than stumbling upon it unaware—the pre-planning and assessment process can help reveal some of the issues that might arise

Scoping involves some of the above activities such as determining if a meeting is necessary and understanding some of the background and context, but tends to take place even earlier than pre-planning and assessment. In addition to determining meeting appropriateness and context, proper scoping will result in three vital pieces of information for the meeting:

1. What is required in terms of time and resources to make this meeting successful? Is this a single meeting or a series of meetings?
2. Are there potential issues—such as open hostility, long-standing conflict or simply an uncooperative meeting 'sponsor'—that will make the meeting unsuccessful (and might even make you a target or scapegoat as a facilitator)?
3. What is the essential information to gather prior to the meeting?

AGENDA BUILDING OVERVIEW

By carefully designing a meeting that includes a combination of techniques to elicit input, make decisions, and resolve conflict, you can create a process robust enough to allow the group to do what the meeting requires.

Agenda building is really all about: TOPICS → OUTCOMES → PROCESSES

There is a purpose or a reason for the meeting (TOPIC), a set of goals (OUTCOMES), and a way to accomplish those goals (PROCESSES). Keeping this structure in your mind as you design agendas will make your life much easier!

Common components of an agenda

Welcome and Introductions: Introductions are key to developing group cohesion, especially if the meeting is the first in a series of meetings with the same group.

Overview of Meeting Purpose, Agenda, and Schedule: Encourage participants to ask questions about the structure, and remind them that the agenda represents their contract with one another and outlines the tasks they will undertake as a group.

Warm-up Exercises: These exercises are invaluable ways to get people vocalizing, which is a critical component of ensuring successful meetings.

Preliminary Steps: Before you tackle the primary tasks of the meeting, you may need to conduct steps such as presenting basic information about the issues at hand. The purpose is to arm participants with the knowledge and tools for use later in the meeting.

Primary Tasks: Dedicate most of the agenda and time allocation to tasks that will achieve meeting goals and objectives. Examples include: (1) Planning and designing a system or process for addressing a problem or issue, (2) Developing an action plan for implementation and initiating this plan, or (3) Evaluating the meeting and its outcomes.

Secondary Tasks: Place tasks that are necessary – but not central to achieving the meeting's primary goals and objectives – later in the meeting to reflect their relative importance in the process.

Meeting Summary, Next Steps, and Closure: End with a review of what has been discussed, accomplished, and decided upon. Action steps with responsibilities and time frames should be created. The meeting should close by the time indicated on the agenda.

Breaks: Schedule breaks every 90 minutes or so to allow participants to stretch, use the restroom, or enjoy refreshments. Forging ahead in the name of productivity will actually severely hamper the group's productivity.

Agenda Building: Sample

Here is one example of how to structure an agenda. There are many other ways – the important point is to keep it clear and keep it as a high level overview, not a place to list all the details.

TITLE OF PROJECT	
MEETING AGENDA	
Time	**(Typical meeting segments are 1 ½ to 2 hours in length)**
8:00am	**Welcome/Introductions**
8:15am	Developing our Future Vision
9:45am	BREAK
10:00am	**Identifying Issues, Constraints, and Opportunities**
12:00pm	LUNCH
1:00pm	**Formulating Strategies**
2:30pm	BREAK
2:45pm	**Formulating Actions**
3:45pm	**Summary and Next Steps**
4:00pm	CLOSE

ESSENTIALS of FACILITATION

Good facilitators are able to balance group process, building relationships and achieving meeting results. The following are some essentials of good facilitation:

1. Being content neutral, or able to walk-the-line masterfully if playing a strategic advising role as well
2. Commitment to the success of the group and aware of any personal agenda they may bring to the table (and are able to put it aside, or recuse themselves)
3. An ability to diagnose what's needed and what's happening in any moment on both an individual and collective level
4. An ability to turn problems into well-articulated solutions through seeing the common ground in what is being said
5. Building comfort in discomfort, and reassuring groups that dialogue and decision-making are challenging and often uncomfortable
6. Creating and maintaining space for creativity and conflict allows better options to emerge in a group
7. Allowing a group to challenge each other, and to disagree gracefully in order to reach agreement: if everyone agrees all the time, it might be a sign that something is not being spoken or attended to
8. Making implicit things explicit by asking provocative, yet inviting questions
9. Managing group energy, and understanding when the group might need a break, or a shift in activity or conversation topic
10. Allowing diverse approaches to problem-solving in both activities and perspectives: not everyone learns or is able to participate in a group similarly and varying types of activities will appeal to different types of people
11. Hearing what is said beyond what is spoken: what is truly happening in the room, with the group, between two individuals, or in the organizational culture as a whole, and how might this be affecting prospects for success?
12. Achieving results and producing greater possibilities through tracking and synthesizing: a facilitator must keep track of and paraphrase or synthesize a tremendous amount of information and often divergent ideas
13. Providing guidance: through understanding the 'landscape' of the meeting and planning appropriately
14. Knowing what to do when you don't know what to do

FACILITATION LANGUAGE and PHRASING

Facilitation requires a slightly different awareness of language and some unique phrases that we might not typically use in our interactions elsewhere.

Some tips about language usage:

- Try to ask open-ended questions wherever possible (e.g. 'What do you think some good ideas might be for solving this problem?' rather than 'Do you think X is a good idea?'
- Reflect back to the group often to get them to react to what they have just said (e.g. 'What I hear you saying is…'; 'It sounds like the option that is emerging is..'; 'The possibilities we seem to be considering are …, or am I missing something?')
- Use mirroring language, which is more detailed than paraphrasing by repeating back to a person exactly what they just said—this is an excellent phrasing technique to use for emphasis if you feel that a participant has just hit on a critical or central issue
- Ask for examples and details ('Can you say more about that?'; 'What exactly do you mean when you describe the issue as challenging?')
- Use encouraging language ('It would be great to hear from someone who hasn't yet spoken or who hasn't spoken in a while'; 'I'd like to invite us to go around one at a time and share a single idea that might address this issue')
- It's important to make space for people who haven't spoken or participated, not only by inviting this generally, but by specifically asking a person who's been silent for some time: 'Jim, you haven't said anything in some time; is there something you'd like to share?')
- When checking for agreement, phrase questions in a negative form, so that people can answer in the affirmative, as this is easier for those who might disagree (e.g. 'Are there any objections to this proposal?' or 'Does anyone have an issue with that?' rather than 'Do we all agree that…?')
- Be exceedingly careful about the kinds of examples you might use to illustrate a point, or metaphors to clarify an issue: people might be more confused by an example or metaphor
- With humor, bad humor is OK, but off-color humor is not: we live in an increasingly diverse society and people can be taken aback even by jokes that we see as innocent. Be very careful when opening with a joke or using a joke to lighten the mood—the wrong joke might have the opposite effect
- Ask questions that allow reflection (e.g. 'What's happening now?' or 'What came up as a result of the last few comments?')
- Remember that sometimes not saying anything at all is an excellent technique—in facilitating wisely, as in music, it's the space between that creates as much of the experience as the sound

TOOLS for GROUP DIALOGUE

There are a variety of approaches that can work with any group, and varying activities and catering to different learning styles is the hallmark of an engaging meeting. Below are 8 tools for group dialogue that can work in a variety of meeting formats.

1. **Open Discussion**

Often the most popular meeting format, open discussion must be facilitated well to keep on task and within timeline. Use with groups who want to explore a variety of issues or get a big picture perspective.

2. **Brainstorming**

Classical tool for generating multiple and diverse ideas, where it is critical to get input from everyone while mirroring statements and keeping judgments and discussion of ideas to a minimum. Used to develop a wide range of possibilities for a group to categorize and decide from.

3. **Structured Go Around**

An excellent tool to encourage participation—allows everyone to contribute equally by calling on each person in the group in order and providing equal time for each statement. Can be used with a particular question or issue, or to check with group about process and next steps.

4. **Roving Conversation**

Gets small groups up and moving around the room to address a particular question or series of questions. The groups document their discussion on flip chart paper and build on the previous group's ideas. Use to get people moving and ideas flowing by breaking up larger groups and still enabling groups to learn from one another by coming together and talking about discoveries from conversations.

5. **Small Groups/Working Groups**

Breaking up groups—either within departments or teams, or in cross-functional teams—to discuss particular issues or work on making decisions. Groups often come together to present after some time and get ideas from other groups, but can also be longer-term working groups to link ideas and actions between meetings.

6. **Think-Pair-Share**

Combines individual reflection, dyad and small group work for building dialogue. Individuals start by reflecting on a question or challenges and then pair with another to share. Activity can stop here and dyads can share feedback with the group, or pairs can join other pairs and form a small group to further explore the issue.

7. **Interviews or Coaching Sessions**

An excellent way of probing deeper into issues, particularly where there might be some conflict or disagreement on next steps. A good teambuilding technique, it allows people to get to know another's perspective by working one-on-one.

8. **Individual Reflection/Journaling**

An individual tool for allowing people to take the time to stop group interaction for a few minutes and collect their thoughts and work on ideas. Often helps where there has been intense conversation and an urge for rapid decision-making, and also can cater to those who like to take additional time to formulate ideas or are less comfortable in group settings.

DIFFICULT DYNAMICS

One of the true arts of skilled facilitators is the ability to deal successfully with difficult people or situations. Without confronting these problems head-on, they can easily spin out of control, completely disrupting or undermining the group process.

Difficult People

Keep in mind the following key points when confronted with a difficult person:

- Remain calm – don't become alarmed too early and overreact; the negative behavior may be short lived.
- Attempt to reduce or eliminate the undesirable behavior with scolding or embarrassing the person. If necessary, talk with the person candidly in private during a break.
- Encourage the group's informal leaders to tactfully intervene if necessary, or ask the group to periodically evaluate its own performance as a group, bringing negative group behaviors to the surface for discussion.
- Encourage other participants to contribute.
- Enforce the ground rules.
- Break into small groups.

Phrases to use with difficult people:

- For dominating, overly talkative participants: "Someone else wants to say something, so let's move on…" "Let's hear from (name) now
- For quiet, shy participants: "Do you have anything you'd like to add?" "Are there any particular points that are important to you?"
- For disagreeing, confrontational participants: "Sounds like we have two views on this. Let's hold these thoughts and move to (name) for a different point." "We're here to get everyone's ideas. If we have time, we'll come back to (issue)."

Difficult Situations

Sometimes the entire group will experience a difficult situation that will require the facilitator's intervention to keep the group focused and productive. Examples include:

- Low attendance
- Lack of interest and motivation
- Touchy Subjects and Obvious Conflicts
- Superficial Discussions
- Off-Topic Discussions

In general, it is important not to show disappointment, to be enthusiastic and upbeat, to remain neutral and be honest and direct, to focus on ideas not personalities, to acknowledge challenges and recognize progress being made, know when to take a break or to move on, to acknowledge points raised and put in "parking lot" and to remind people of the meeting goals, agreements, and ground rules.

MEETING INTERVENTIONS and MANAGING GROUP ENERGY

Types of Interventions

1. ***Process re-structuring***
   Use a technique that changes the structure of the group dialogue (dyads, small groups, reflection), uses problem-solving games (role plays, decision matrices, teambuilding exercises), or changes the original agenda (including taking a break).
2. ***Content re-focusing***
   Bring the original topic to the group, approach the topic from an alternate perspective or change/'table' the topic
3. ***Energy shifting***
   Change the feeling tone of the group through feedback, inquiry, confrontation, suggestion, inspiration, humor or modeling

How to Intervene

- Be clear about the situation you are trying to address.
- Offer a clear suggestion of how to get back on track
- See if the group will quickly accept your suggestion
- Try to avoid debates about which process to use

Intervention Examples

Stuck and unable to solve problem
1. Try a different approach
2. Focus on a particular part of the problem
3. Take a break and get some fresh air

Discussion is unfocused
1. Focus comments on a particular issue
2. Synthesize issues and focus on each in turn
3. Take time to reflect on issues before speaking further

One or more people are dominating discussion
1. Ask to hear from people who haven't spoken yet or ask that those speaking hold off ("does anyone who hasn't said anything yet…")
2. Re-visit original topic, or ask if there is another topic more appropriate
3. Inspire people to get into the conversation through a structured go-around

Low energy
1. Take a stretch break, use a tool like brainstorming, dyads or roving conversation that increases participation and engagement
2. Mention that the energy seems low and inquire about focus on the appropriate issue ("Is there something else that would be more exciting?")
3. Take a break, or increase your energy to increase the group's energy (there may also be a latent conflict here which is bogging the group down)

Conflict with no listening

1. Use a structured go-around allowing one person to speak at a time, remind group of the ground rules/agreements
2. Switch to a topic that might be easier to agree on, coming back to challenging topic
3. Encourage people to raise the bar, see that they are on the same team, working for the same goal (might necessitate doing some follow-up with individuals to assess progress post-meeting)

Going off topic

1. Remind the group of time limitations, see if people want to spend more time on the particular issue at hand, or promise to return to conversation after completing agenda topic (this problem might indicate that your meeting is focused on the wrong issue)
2. Legitimize the discussion, but remind people of the topic and re-focus them on that question or issue

Disruptive participants/side conversations

1. Address particular person directly, asking if she or he needs more support on a certain issue
2. Ensure that the disruptive parties know what the topic is by reminding them what content everyone else is working on
3. Be clear with individuals—separately or in the group—that we are here to focus on a particular result and we need their participation and support

Pace toward result too slow/too fast

1. Changing structure to allow for more time on decisions or helping group focus
2. Remind people about importance of topic and need to achieve results on issue X—focus comments on this issue, but don't rush toward decisions
3. State importance of conversation and need to either slow down, or need for results and encourage group to speed up (or change formats to allow for more productivity—small working groups are effective here)

Group moves to closure without appropriate buy-in

1. Take a break to ensure that everyone is on the same page, use an open or individual rating scale (based on levels of agreement) to assess commitment
2. Question whether the group has arrived at the best decision: take 5 minutes to play devil's advocate (a good practice to check for agreement and appropriateness generally)
3. Declare that the group has reached a critical point, but that it's hard to tell if everyone is on board

Major breakdown

1. Stop meeting, mention what is happening and ask the group to both 'raise the bar' and change meeting format using a group dialogue tool (fishbowl, go-around, think-pair-share) to surface what's going on
2. Take a break, or an opportunity for reflection/silence and be clear about what's happening, ask for group's help

NEXT STEPS, EVALUATION, and POST MEETING COMMUNICATION

Next Steps
An essential step in closing any meeting is to ensure that everyone understands and agrees to the meeting's follow-up tasks. In the experience of many, agreements reached during meetings are likely to be implemented poorly, if at all. The odds of successful implementation increase when a group take the time to spell out specifically what needs to be done, who will do it, by when, and with what resources. So how to we do this?

The following matrix is an effective, time-tested method for establishing next steps:

Tasks	Who	By When	Resources Needed

Process:
1. List all tasks that need to be done.
2. If additional tasks are identified later, add them to the list.
3. Number each task. Then discuss: "*Who will do this? By when? What resources are needed?* Often, this thinking is done in an open discussion format, in which group members flip back and forth from one question to another
4. As specific agreements are made, write them on the chart.

Evaluate the Meeting
Evaluation is a valuable task that will enable the Meeting Management Team to make improvements for the next meeting. There are two basic approaches:

<u>Quick and Simple Method:</u> This involves asking people to quickly identify (1) what they liked most, (2) what they liked least, and (3) what would they do to improve the meeting.

<u>In-Depth Method:</u> This approach asks participants to consider how well each component of the meeting met the stated goals and objectives. This more elaborate evaluation requires that participants fill out a prepared questionnaire.

Post-Meeting Communication
The first step in communicating the results of the meeting is to collect all flip charts, wall graphics, questionnaires, etc. and label them with the meeting's title and date.

The next step is to prepare a ***Summary Report***. This is a critical part of the process and should be done as soon as possible after the meeting. The report supports the meeting's goals and objectives by: **(1)** giving people direct, immediate feedback on the fruits of their labors, **(2)** supporting decision-making by reporting results of discussion, **(3)** documenting discussion and agreements and discussions for future reference, **(4)** extending the results to a wider audience beyond the meeting group, thus widening the circle of involvement, and **(5)** providing the basis for development of an action plan for implementing the meeting's decisions or launching the next phase of a larger process.

SETTING UP and 'CLOSURE'

How a meeting starts and ends can often determine its ultimate success. In a concern to address the core topic of the meeting, it's often easy—especially with a results-oriented group—to gloss or skip over a strong start and identifying clear decisions and next steps.

A few tips for set up and closure for meetings can illustrate the importance of beginning on a good foot and leaving gracefully.

Setting Up

- Follow up with meeting participants 24 hours before the meeting with a final agenda and a re-iteration of what you'll be doing in the meeting: as with meeting pre-planning, setting a positive tone is essential
- Phone calls to key individuals in the days leading up the meeting might also be appropriate
- Make sure you have all materials/handouts necessary and that refreshments/lunch have been arranged—even if someone else is taking care of this
- If there is information for the meeting that needs to be circulated (other than an agenda), be sure people have 5-7 days to review this prior to the meeting
- If there are charts or other graphics to be posted, be sure that these have been done prior to the meeting and that the amount of wall space you will need is available. Be sure you have the appropriate fasteners for the type of wall space available: masking tape, push pins, Velcro, clips, flip chart easel?
- Arrive at least 30-45 minutes before any meeting starts to physically set-up, *especially* if you are unfamiliar with the space
- Provide name tags, if appropriate
- Introduce yourself to all participants before starting the meeting, welcoming them as they arrive
- Be sure to welcome and include anyone who has arrived late as well
- Start the meeting by framing why everyone is here briefly and then jumping into introductions and/or an icebreaker (these can often be combined) before starting to review the agenda and desired outcomes
- Often, it is appropriate to begin the meeting with a quote or reflection to help frame the theme for the meeting. This can give people a chance to 'arrive' and focus, which will help set a good tone.
- Depending on the type and length of meeting, engage participants in setting agreements before—or immediately after—reviewing the agenda
- Review facilitator requests and housekeeping items (where's the bathroom, etc.) before getting into the heart of the meeting
- Keep reminding participants of the goals for the meeting throughout the meeting as a process tool

'Closure'

- Remember that closure is something that we always strive for, but that comes in different ways at the end of a meeting: creating a sense of closure, even when there is no obvious closure is a central task for a facilitator
- Be sure to leave enough time at the end of any meeting (even one lasting an hour) to evaluate the meeting and talk about next steps
- In a meeting where there has been heated or complex discussion, be sure to reiterate what happened: decisions that were made, the nature of the disagreement and what might be learned from it, what outcomes were achieved and which are still outstanding
- Use evaluation time to talk about 'what worked well?' and 'what was accomplished?' as well as 'where we fell short?' or 'what needs to improved for next time?'
- Be clear about where information from the bike rack/parking lot will go and how it will be used
- Ensure that all understand their roles and responsibilities and that there is a timeline for tasks and an accountability structure: a planning matrix can help with this, listing the task, who's responsible and when the deliverable is due
- Be sure to set a date for a follow-up meeting, if necessary. Often, the facilitator can get basic agreement from the group on when the next meeting should be (early April), keeping in mind the time required for participants to work between meetings and follow-up with a date poll via e-mail (www.doodle.com is a basic, but fairly effective on-line tool if you don't have someone available to set a next meeting date)
- Be clear with the group about how they need to work between meetings—clarify roles and that you will follow-up with individuals or teams, if necessary
- End with thanks, a joke, a challenge, a frank statement of progress made (however minimal)—anything that gets people feeling good about the work they did and motivated to continue on next steps

RUNNING EFFECTIVE MEETINGS REVIEW

Pre-Meeting: Plan, Prepare and Inform

- *Determine purpose & outcomes, and set goals:* Focus on results - What do I want to achieve by the end of the meeting? Who is the client? Who needs to be satisfied? Is a meeting the best way to handle this?

- *Determine who should attend:* Who needs the information? Who can contribute? Who would expect to be involved?

- *Amount of Prior Notice:* How long do people need to prepare? What is the meeting date?

- *Pre-Work:* What information can be supplied in advance? What should participants prepare/do before they come?

- *Build the agenda:* What items remain from previous meetings? What new items need to be discussed? What is the best process to drive each agenda item? What is the best mix of activities for this group? Get input from co-workers/meeting participants. Set realistic time parameters for each agenda item. Design meeting to maximize group energy. Come well prepared to the meeting to handle each agenda item. Inform people of the final agenda.

- *Determine room set-up:* What room should be booked? If possible, get a room with some natural light, lots of wall space, table(s) that can be moved, and with enough room for small breakout group work. What seating is needed? Make sure chairs are comfortable. What equipment is needed?

Meeting Day: Structure and Focus

- *Getting Started:* Check expectations. Make sure people have really "arrived" before you review agenda. Review agenda. Ask for input. Establish operating agreements (ground rules). Be sure you have agreement and commitment before beginning.

- *Keeping the Group on Purpose:*
    - Proceed step-by-step thorough the agenda – direct group's attention to outcomes desired at each step and the input you need from them.
    - Keep activities and comments focused on the topic – help teach your group to discipline its focus
    - Keep energy moving forward – point out progress being made and be aware of repetition, lack of focus, bogging down, etc.
    - Keep track of time – be disciplined but flexible and open to changing the agenda to accomplish desired results
    - Carefully manage transitions between agenda items, ensuring closure on each item and movement as a group to next item

- *Getting the Participation You Need:*
    - Set the tone for participation with exercises/activities in the opening of the meeting that include participation
    - Monitor and limit your own participation in content; be a facilitator of process

- Chart discussion, decisions and conclusions
- Allow silence
- Be a gatekeeper when necessary – monitor those who dominate, draw out those not participating
- Deal directly with resistance
- Use specific tools that that encourage participation (i.e brainstorming, dyads and sub-groups, etc.)

- *Creating Good Closure*
  - Review decisions and plans for actions
  - Record agreements and next steps
  - Delegate follow-up responsibility
  - Deal directly with unfinished business
  - Create ample time at the end for feedback and other input
  - Acknowledge group for its contributions
  - Communicate to those who were not there

References

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