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Effective Meeting Facilitation



Martin Zander

M. Zander

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Effective Meeting Facilitation

Introduction

Say the word "meeting" and expect to hear sighs, groans, or sarcastic remarks. Yet, planning requires people to come together frequently over a period of time in a word meeting. Well-planned and facilitated meetings sustain participants' energy and allow them to contribute their best thinking to the planning endeavor.

The planning process is like a slide show that follows a logical sequence from beginning to end. Each slide represents a single meeting. The whole of the planning process will be greater than the aggregate of each meeting, but only if each meeting is orchestrated to accomplish the requisite function. Like each individual slide, the composition of a meeting is designed to convey a message or fulfill a purpose.

A large part of the planning process is accomplished in meetings because, as the saying goes, "Two heads are better than one." Each member of the planning team brings an essential perspective to the process. Elements of a plan goals or solutions to problems are not the only outcome of planning meetings. The interactive work transpiring to develop the plan is as important - if not more important - than the plan itself. Think of a time you recounted a funny story, but no one laughed. Then, you realize, "Well, I guess you had to be there to appreciate it." That's the way it is with planning: Those who must carry out the plan with energy and enthusiasm, must be there to help create the plan.

Checklist

The information in this course is presented primarily for the person who will be responsible for pulling those meetings together, leading them, and coordinating tasks in preparation for

meetings and the follow-up steps in their wake. Topics cover the items on a facilitator's checklist.

- Identify the purpose, or expected outcome, of the meeting.
- Make sure the right people will be there.
- Develop the agenda.
- Prepare necessary materials.
- Double check the room set up.
- Lead the meeting as a facilitator
- Agree on ground rules
- Practice facilitation skills
- Use consensus-building decision making techniques
- Be prepared to handle conflict as it surfaces
- Clarify "next steps" and assignments
- Reflect on effectiveness of the meeting (evaluation)

Think Before You Meet

What outcome do we want to achieve

It is not unusual to spend as much time planning a meeting as running it. Preparation begins with asking these questions:

A newspaper editorial from an irate father just after attending his daughter's college orientation session serves to illustrate the usefulness of understanding the various reasons for meetings. This man went to the meeting to learn about courses of study, relevant deadlines, tuition and expenses, financial aide, and safety precautions. "I knew I was in trouble," he said, "when I entered a room full of chairs set up in a circle." The meeting was

designed, instead, to explore feelings about one's child going off to college, and to build relationships with other parents.

Whether you identify with the father who sought specific information and was sorely disappointed, or the meeting planners who offered an opportunity for consciousness raising - the point is that the purpose of the meeting must be clearly identified. The purpose drives who should attend, the agenda items, what materials or equipment to have on hand, and the direction of the next meeting.

Knowing that the purpose of the meeting is "planning" is not enough. More specifically, people meet for one of, or for a combination of these reasons:

- Information exchange (acquiring or disseminating information or both)
- Self-awareness or consciousness raising
- Learning (topics and skills)
- Creative thinking and generating ideas (brainstorming)
- Critical thinking (analysis, goal setting, problem solving, decision making)
- Accomplishing tasks
- Building relationships and commitment

How much time will each item realistically require

To achieve the desired meeting outcome, what must we do during the meeting? And how much time will each item realistically require?

Knowing the purpose of the meeting is a first step in structuring the agenda. Having a firm idea of where you want to be by the end of the meeting suggests what must be covered during the meeting. Do we need to review last year's budget? Do we want to create a common vision of our organization in the year 2020? If we want consensus on four short-term goals, how can we both inspire creative thinking yet maintain a sense of reality?