

# A User's Guide To Meetings

By Mary Heath

Every person in a meeting has the responsibility and the capacity to make a difference to the way that meeting works.

What can meeting participants do to make a difference?

## **Decide to be an active co-operator rather than a passive consumer of the meeting**

Some examples of what this means:

- Really listening to what others have to say: it cuts down on repetition and increases understanding.
- Actively thinking about your own contributions: Are you following the agreements the group has set? Is what you have to say constructive? Can you say it more clearly or more briefly?
- Considering whether physical changes are needed to make the whole meeting go better: would it help to bring something for people to eat together? Could you volunteer to take minutes, write notes up on the board, keep a speaking list, or undertake other jobs that you see need to be done? You don't need to wait for someone else to realise these things are needed.
- Making sure you speak at a volume everyone can hear and in words that everyone can understand.

## **Support people who have particular roles in the meeting**

Some examples of what this means:

- Supporting the facilitator: They are central to the meeting. Anything that assists them to do their job will benefit everyone. Listen to their requests and abide by them. Address your contributions through them. Realise that the facilitator is not there to arm wrestle the group into sticking to the agreements they have made together in spite of themselves! Do your part in keeping group agreements without having to be kept to them by the facilitator's intervention. If you forget a group agreement, accept the facilitator's reminder graciously.
- Supporting the minute taker: make sure s/he is getting the information s/he needs down on paper. Stop to let her or him catch up if necessary.
- Support translators. Watch carefully to see that you are speaking at an appropriate rate for translation to be undertaken with clarity and without undue stress. Ensure that translators are provided with the physical circumstances and the amount of breaks necessary for them to do their jobs well. Don't patronise them or the people they are translating for.
- Give up criticism: there is no room for criticism for the sake of it in this world. Most of us have had more than our fair share already. People will not change if they feel attacked or alone. Tell people what they did well in their roles, and provide them with constructive suggestions only if they ask for feedback.
- Train people for important tasks: don't expect them to know what is needed without having a space to learn.

## **Put the group's needs before your own**

Ultimately the two have more in common than may be apparent to you on a bad day!

Realise that you don't need to act on or share your feelings just because you have some. Decide whether this meeting is the appropriate time and place. A meeting is usually not the place to tell people about the bad day you had, attack individuals, prove how intelligent and witty you are, etc.

Realise that putting the group's overall needs first is not the same as being on your nicest, nicest behaviour. It requires you to be honest, thoughtful and generous. It may mean heading directly toward conflict and making sure it is productively dealt with, rather than being 'nice' and preventing conflict making its way into the open, resulting in bad decisions and bitching after the meeting is over. Refusing to be 'nice' is not about making a decision to be nasty but about making a decision to be real, no matter how difficult that may feel to you.

Take courage! The best thing for the group (and for your life too...) might mean you decide to do things that are difficult for you. If you usually speak a lot, challenge yourself to speak less and let others take a turn. Think very hard about whether here is the constructive time and place to say what is on your mind. If you never speak, challenge yourself to let the group know about your ideas.

Experiment, innovate, try out new ideas. If you don't, how can you know whether they would have been improvements on the past?