

Meetings: A Guide For Facilitators

by Mary Heath.

Always keep in mind the fact that the smooth running of the meeting is in everyone's best interests. Where necessary, remind people who have lost sight of this for the moment

Reason

The long-term survival of the garden depends on it. If meetings are lengthy, boring, and ineffective, if people feel too afraid to speak up, and the environment is unfriendly or outright hostile, we won't achieve much, and we'll lose a lot of passionate, skilled people. Assuming that it's in everyone's interests for meetings to go well allows the most creative solutions to tricky situations.

Suggestions

If the group has agreed on procedures it wants to follow, it's your job to remind people about them if they forget. Sometimes it will help to say them at the beginning of the meeting: "At the last meeting we agreed that we would all listen to each other with respect. Is everyone here prepared to keep to that agreement tonight?" or "Just a quick reminder that we've agreed that meetings will end at 9.00 p.m. There's a lot to discuss tonight, so we'll all need to be brief and stick to the point to keep our deadline." If people break the group's agreement, wander from the point or talk at length they may need a gentle reminder from you.

The same goes for values that the group has agreed to uphold: "this group has agreed that to make meetings run smoothly and to encourage everyone to participate, we all need to use language that isn't sexist or racist." Or it might be appropriate to suggest an alternative: "Perhaps we could minute that as staffing the door at the concert rather than manning it?" Don't forget to keep to these agreements yourself.

If people get snittish with you for drawing these sorts of things to their attention, gently remind them that the group has agreed that these things are necessary to make the meeting run well, and you're just keeping your part of that agreement as facilitator. On this occasion that might mean that you've just told them it's not yet their turn to speak. You'll need to be told the same thing one day when you're passionate about the issue under discussion and someone else is facilitating.

Don't waste time getting defensive if people respond to your reminders about group agreements as though you've attacked them personally. If there's something wrong with the procedure the group has agreed on, it can be changed anytime and this is in all our interests if the present system isn't workable.

You will make mistakes: everyone does. You can't let that stop you from doing everything possible to make the meeting function well. Take courage in yourself and set up support you need to do your job well and learn from any mistakes you make. If you think you have genuinely made a mistake, clean it up on the spot if appropriate, or later if that will avoid taking up the whole group's time. Always act on what you believe makes sense for the whole group rather than on soothing individual people's feelings (including your own) no matter how unreasonable they are!

Involve yourself in organisational issues

Reason

These things are central to the efficient running of the meeting.

Suggestions

Make sure you can see everyone in the meeting. Rearrange the chairs if necessary. Make sure that there is someone taking minutes.

Make sure that the agenda has been worked out before the meeting begins and that it is logically structured. Check for late additions.

Once the group has taken a decision, make sure someone/some people have taken responsibility for following it up.

Make sure that those who've agreed to take on tasks are minuted so that they won't be forgotten.

Ask people who have agreed to get information to send a written report to the next meeting if they can't get to it in person.

Make sure the date, time and place for the next meeting are clear before the current meeting ends. Decide on the facilitator of the next meeting in advance so that s/he can prepare.

Be observant. Listen carefully. Notice where you can make the meeting run better and take action

Reason

Making the meeting run well is the core of your task as facilitator. That means making sure that clear and efficient processes are followed. It also means making sure that everyone at the meeting has the opportunity and enough encouragement to participate

Suggestions

Notice when agreement has been reached. Summarise the agreement you think has been reached and ask the group if they agree with you. On important issues, look around the room and seek a nod of the head from every person. You can double check by asking, "Does anyone NOT agree?"

Notice if several issues are being discussed together when one of them really needs to be decided first. For example, it's a waste of time and energy to discuss dates, times and a workshop list for the conference without having discussed whether we want to run the conference at all, and then having worked out whether anyone is prepared to put in the amount of time and energy it will take to do it. Draw the problem to the attention of the group and suggest a structure.

Notice if two or more issues are getting muddled together when they could be discussed more efficiently separately. For example, time and valuable ideas will be lost if we discuss how much to charge for the fundraiser, what date to have it on, what to write on the poster and what bands to have – all at once. Break the question down into sections and suggest a structure: "It seems to me that we're getting a bit lost here. I suggest that we discuss price first, then the date, then the bands..."

Notice who is waiting to speak, and in what order. If keeping track of this is preventing you from following what is being said or is distracting other people in the meeting, take action. You can stop the discussion, ask who wants to speak and write their names down on a queue, or ask someone else to keep a speaking list while you focus on the rest of your job. Double check whether anyone else wants to be placed on the list.

Always notice groups or individuals that aren't speaking. Look for body language: ask fidgety people if they want to speak. Make sure that people know that their contributions are valuable. If you've noticed

that none of the people from organisation X have spoken or that none of the women have said anything yet, say that you've noticed it and ask if any of them would like to speak.

Be on the look out for confusion. Provide clarification yourself or ask for someone to explain. For example, "It seems as though some of us thought that we'd decided to do X already, but others are still discussing whether or not we should do it. I think we need to clear that up before we go any further." If you haven't understood, ask for explanation, because you won't be able to do your job properly if you can't follow the discussion.

Don't blame anyone. That will only make for more confusion. Discourage people from blaming too – it won't help anyone work out the best way to move forward, but will make for a more heated discussion which is likely to produce more confused people.

Notice when a summary of what has been decided so far or what points of view have been expressed so far would help, and provide it.

Notice when confusing words or lots of acronyms (bunches of initials, such as A.P.T) are being used and explain them. Encourage people who are in the meeting to do the same. For example: "Could you please explain what you mean by SAGFIN?" "I suggest that for the sake of those here who don't know all the abbreviations that the first time anyone uses one, they explain what it means."

Notice when the debate has stopped and people are repeating points. Invite people to remove themselves from the queue unless they have a *new* point to make.

Focus your attention on facilitating the meeting rather than your own feelings and ideas about the content of the discussion

Reason

As facilitator, you've accepted the job of helping the meeting run well for everyone. The chair is not the place to air your opinions and grudges. Like the director of a play, your job is to work out the best way to do things, not to speak all the parts, do the acting, or write the script.

Suggestions

Before the meeting, ask someone to listen to you talk through your fears and strategies so that you can clear your head and clarify the issues. Think through your approaches to situations that are likely to come up and that you might find difficult or distracting. For example, if someone always uses sexist language in meetings and it makes you feel like punching them out, first work out a strategy for keeping your cool. Then think over how you could effectively bring it to their attention. If it's an ongoing problem, it may be something the whole group needs to address.

If you have strong views on an agenda item that no one else seems likely to speak about, try to see to it (before the meeting begins) that someone who agrees with you puts your point of view to the meeting.

If in spite of planning in this way, you feel that you really must speak and no one else has covered the point you want to make, pass responsibility for facilitation to someone else while you make your point and while the group discusses it. Do this very clearly and directly. For example; "I would like to address this point, so I'd like to pass responsibility for facilitating to Robyn while we discuss this issue." When the discussion is over, take back responsibility for facilitation in the same way.

The idea here is to make the facilitator's role as neutral as possible, making sure that when you speak you're subject to the same limits as everyone else. It also allows you to give all your attention to the point you're trying to make while someone else takes responsibility for the running of the meeting. It's important that everyone at the meeting knows who is facilitating so that they know whose eye to catch when they want to speak.

Don't be fazed by conflict. Don't take sides. Be as neutral as you can

Reason

The meeting will run better if everyone in the group knows that you will listen to their point of view and allow them to be heard by others. Of course you have opinions and feelings, and these will often be known to the group. The people in the group need to be confident that when you are facilitating you will not act on your prejudices, cut off people whose opinions are different from yours, or use the chair to talk about your opinions and your feelings. Otherwise there will not be enough safety for everyone to participate.

Suggestions

Be aware of your own biases and take steps to get them off your chest somewhere else, where they won't affect the meeting.

Never do things, make remarks, or make jokes that put down any person or group present at the meeting. Many people find meetings intimidating and don't need encouragement of their shyness.

Your neutrality is especially important where conflict arises. Never contribute to a feeling of 'us and them'. If things get really heated, ask the people or groups involved to say what they're hoping to achieve from their proposals. What are their goals? What are they hoping to achieve? When all viewpoints present have answered these questions, aim to draw out whatever common ground is present and encourage the group to maximise it as co-operatively as possible. Bear in mind that your job, as facilitator is *not* to keep everyone happy but to assist in reaching a workable solution to the problem, conflict or goal.

If the group has come to a clear agreement about an issue with the exception of one or two people, make sure that those people have a chance to express why they disagree and what they propose instead.

Your facilitation strategies for dealing with difference and conflict will depend on the [decision-making processes](#) the group has agreed to. If you are using consensus and a disagreement isn't overcome through discussion, you can ask the dissenters if their disagreement is so serious that they are prepared to block consensus because of it. If they are, no consensus has been reached and the issue will have to be postponed. If the group has decided on a 'majority vote' you may ask the group if they are ready to put the issue to a vote.

Ask for help when you need it

Reason

As facilitator, you have an important job to do. If you don't do a good job, the whole meeting will suffer. Your wellbeing is in everyone's interests.

Suggestions

Ask for a break if you need one, help with setting the agenda, help from someone/s with skills or information you need, someone/s to discuss strategy with, someone/s to give you constructive feedback, hugs, or a glass of water... Ask a friendly person to sit across the circle from you and smile at you when you look at them!

Ideas for members of the group

For a facilitator to do a good job, the group needs to agree on what the job involves. Two things are needed:

1. Agreement about what procedures the group wants to follow. Do we work by consensus or do we vote about things? Do people who have spoken once have to wait for everyone else who wants to speak about a particular issue to speak before they get another turn? Is there a time limit on how long you can speak? Do we agree that we should split into small discussion groups to talk about the main item on the agenda in every meeting? Do speakers have to go through the facilitator? Do we take time at the end of every meeting where everyone has a chance to say how they felt the meeting went? ...and so on.
2. Agreement about the values that the group wants to uphold in meetings. Do we agree that we don't want sexist, racist, or homophobic language and remarks in our meetings? If we do, how do we put that into practice? Do we have a 'no blaming' rule? Do we agree that we don't want put-downs in our meetings?

For meetings to work well, we all need to take responsibility both for ourselves, and for the way the meetings run. The facilitator is there to help with the running of the meeting, not to act as a police officer and keep people in line... we need to realise that we're all on the same team and work at co-operating.

Support people who take on jobs like minute taking and facilitating. They will do the job better, learn from their mistakes, and be prepared to take the job on again.