
Strategic Training Solutions'

Guide to Meeting Facilitation

Best Practices and Talking Tips

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Meeting Facilitation Best Practices

1. MAINTAIN AN INFORMAL, RELAXED, COMFORTABLE STYLE

PURPOSE:

The effective facilitator has a conversational manner of speaking, a comfortable voice, an easy smile and relaxed physical presence. An informal and accessible style encourages participation, free flow of ideas, risk-taking and responsibility by the group members. By contrast, a rigid, authoritative, unsmiling and uptight manner does not encourage easy participation and often engenders confrontational opposition.

FACILITATOR COMMENTS:

- *“Thanks for your thoughts”*
- *“I understand what you are saying about....”*
- *“I’m sure we all appreciate the pressures you are under to...”*
- *“That’s helpful. Do you have anything else to add?”*

FACILITATOR TECHNIQUES:

- *Smile.*
- *Look at the person who is speaking or to whom you are speaking.*
- *Open your hands and arms as often as possible.*
- *Do not fold arms across your chest.*

2. READS AND RESPONDS TO NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR

PURPOSE:

Since we know that the verbal component of a conversation carries only 35% of the meaning, it is important to have some mastery of the nonverbal communication. The purpose of this behavior is to be able to recognize the cues that people are sending you and use that information to facilitate the discussion. It is important to keep in mind that nonverbal cues can be misinterpreted; therefore, the best way to respond is to ask a question.

FACILITATOR COMMENTS QUESTIONS:

- *“You look like you have a question about this.”*
- *“Do I sense that you disagree with what was just said?”*
- *“Does your experience tell you something else about this problem?”*
- *“Something seems to be on your mind. What is it?”*
- *“It seems to me that you are having trouble seeing how this could work in your area. What are your concerns?”*

3. ATTEMPTS TO INVOLVE ALL PARTICIPANTS

PURPOSE:

Although the purpose may seem obvious, it is not involvement for involvement's sake. We want involvement because 1) more ideas lead to better ideas, 2) more ideas help us to anticipate problems and develop coping strategies, and finally, 3) involvement is the key to alignment to decisions and commitment to action. When people have had an opportunity to influence a decision, they are more likely to support it.

FACILITATOR COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS:

- *“How do the rest of you feel about this proposal?”*
- *“We haven't heard from the folks in the _____ department. How do you react to this suggestion?”*
- *“We have heard how the people in _____ feel about it; now let's hear from the people in other departments.”*
- *“Would someone else care to comment on this?”*
- *“Does anyone else have a reaction to this insight/proposal/suggestion?”*
- *“We realize that you feel very strongly about this. Can we hear from some other folks?”*
- *“What other points of view are there?”*
- *“Would someone else tell us how this approach could work in their area?”*

4. KEEPS THE DISCUSSION ON TARGET

PURPOSE:

Once again, the purpose may be obvious. However, keeping the discussion on target helps you do two things: (1) manage the time, and (2) get to your desired outcome. Since people have limited time for meetings, you have to ensure that the discussion does not drag on and that it stays focused on the goal of the meeting. When the discussion wanders, it is up to you to use your facilitation skills to bring it back.

FACILITATOR COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS:

- *“Where are we in relation to _____?”*
- *“We seem to be off our original area of concern. Do you want to continue or get back to our topic?”*
- *“Why are we discussing this topic right now?”*
- *“It looks like we have drifted off of the agenda.”*
- *“Let get refocused on _____”*
- *“What has that got to do with ____?”*
- *“I’m confused. Where are we in relation to this agenda item?”*
- *“Does anyone object to us returning to the discussion of _____?”*

5. DEALS EFFECTIVELY WITH OBJECTIONS AND DISAGREEMENTS

PURPOSE:

Your role here is to get the objections and other negative feelings out and handled in a constructive manner. You want to make sure that the meeting does not turn into a gripe session. It's important that the discussion have some balance between the advantages and disadvantages. In addition, after some discussion of problems, you want to move the group to solutions including how the obstacles and objections can be overcome. A key to success is to help the group keep focused on the goal of the meeting or the decision that needs to be agreed upon.

FACILITATOR COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS:

- *"You have some concerns about this recommendation?"*
- *"What can we do to re-work the proposal and make it acceptable to you?"*
"Tell us how you would handle it and still meet our objective to _____?"
- *"Who can give us the advantages of this approach?"*
- *"We all agree that cutting costs is necessary; how do we do that and still maintain quality?"*
- *"Keep in mind that our primary purpose here today is _____."*
- *"How does your comment help us to reach that goal?"*
- *"If we deal with your concern, will you support the recommendation?"*
- *"How do you think your customers will react to this change?"*

6. MOVES THE DISCUSSION ALONG TO A CONCLUSION OR A DECISION

PURPOSE:

Throughout the meeting, as you deal with each item, it is necessary to keep the group focused on the outcome – acting on a recommendation, agreeing on a plan, making a decision. It is your role to provide the structure for the group and then help them reach their goal. It is not enough to just have a group discussion. You and your group should want to reach closure – to do something or to take action.

FACILITATOR COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS

- *“Is everyone clear on what we are proposing here?”*
- *“As you look at the alternatives, what strikes you as the best approach?”*
- *“Setting aside the specifics for the moment, it looks like we all agree that this is the way to go. Am I right on that?”*
- *“If we can eliminate the problems that have been noted, are you ready to move forward and support this plan?”*
- *“Let me summarize the key points on which we agree.”*
- *“We’ve talked a lot about this recommendation and the consensus appears to be.....”*
- *“While not everyone is happy with the whole package, we’re still willing to give it a shot. Let’s talk about the next steps.”*

7. HELP THE GROUP IDENTIFY CLEAR ACTION ITEMS AND COMMITMENTS

PURPOSE:

A decision without a plan can be worse than no decision at all. Effective facilitation requires that the group members commit to take action to implement the decision. In many ways, agreeing to take on tasks is an indicator of commitment. If people are willing to accept and follow through on action items, this is a sign of a healthy and mature group. It's also signals a successful facilitator.

FACILITATOR COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS

- *“We’ve decided to go ahead with the recommendation to……. Let’s list the steps involved in implementing this approach.”*
- *“You have agreed to _____. What are the next steps?”*
- *“Let’s brainstorm a list of tasks that must be completed in order to reach this objective.”*
- *“We gave agreed on these action items. Now, let’s get some volunteers to take responsibility for each item.”*
- *Let’s go down the list of task and assign responsibility for each along with a due date for completion. I’ll write them on the whiteboard.*

8. CLOSE THE MEETING ON A POSITIVE AND FORWARD LOOKING NOTE

PURPOSE:

How you end a meeting is as important as how you open a meeting. The purpose of a positive closing is to summarize what has been accomplished and what will happen next, as well as to “celebrate” the successes. The facilitator can take responsibility for summarizing or it can be done by the scribe. The summary is also a final reminder for group members of their decisions and their personal action items. In addition, it is often helpful to take five minutes at the end of a meeting to ask for assessment of the meeting.

FACILITATOR COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS

- *Before we wrap up, let's quickly review the key decisions and next steps.*
- *What do you see as the most important outcome of this meeting?*
- *How do you feel about what we accomplished today?*
- *Let's take a few minutes to reflect on our meeting process. What might we want to consider doing differently next time?*