

## 4.3: Facilitating a Meeting

### Learning Objectives

1. Describe features of a poorly-facilitated group meeting
2. Identify guidelines for facilitating a meeting effectively
3. Discuss steps for facilitating virtual meetings

*Most committees I've served on have been inefficient, superfluous, repetitive, sluggish, unproductive, erratic, rancorous, or boring—or all of the above. By and large, they've wasted my time and the time of many other people.*

*Frequently, everyone in the group eagerly helped identify jobs that needed to be accomplished, but just a few members ended up shouldering the burdens and completing the tasks. The rest did their best to avoid the group entirely and had to be cajoled or badgered to take part in meetings and work. Most of the meetings oscillated between tedium, dreariness, and fruitless conflict. In short, the meetings were cesspools of futility. - Phil Venditti*

Preparing for group meetings well takes you a third of the way toward ensuring their productivity, and follow-up takes care of another third. The middle third of the process is to run the meetings efficiently.

Make no mistake: facilitating a meeting well is difficult. It requires care, vigilance, flexibility, resilience, humility, and humor. In a way, in fact, to run a meeting effectively calls upon you to act the way a skilled athletic coach does, watching the action, calling plays, and encouraging good performance. Furthermore, you need to monitor the interaction of everyone around you and “call the plays” based on a game plan that you and your fellow group members have presumably agreed upon in advance. Finally, like a coach, you sometimes need to call timeouts—breaks—when people are weary or the action is starting to get raggedy or undisciplined.

### A Meeting Heroine

We will list and explain several principles and practices of good meeting facilitation in this section, but first, let's consider a friend and colleague of ours named Bonnie. Bonnie is the best meeting facilitator we've ever met, for several reasons. First of all, she makes it a point to become familiar with not only the issues and topics to be dealt with in a meeting, but also the personalities, strengths, and foibles of the other people who will be participating. Although she behaves in a warm and friendly manner at all times during a meeting, she never veers off into extraneous or superfluous details just for the sake of being sociable.

Because she attends closely to every interaction in a meeting and takes the time in advance to become familiar with the styles and proclivities of participants, Bonnie prevents discussions from getting off track. In fact, she has an uncanny knack of being able to spot a train of discussion that might even just be getting ready to go off track so that she can nudge it safely around bends and down slippery slopes. Furthermore, she seems to always know exactly what questions to ask, and to whom, to elicit concise, purposeful information which helps the group keep moving in the proper direction.

Bonnie is totally efficient and systematic in her pacing and wastes no time from the moment a meeting begins to the moment it ends...or afterward, either. If you go to a meeting led by Bonnie and its purpose is to plan an event—an Arbor Day celebration, for example, since that's a project she oversees every year in the town where she lives—you can be confident of the outcome. When the meeting ends, the event will be planned and you will be feeling good about yourself, about the meeting itself, and about the future of the group.

### Perils of Poor Facilitation

Unfortunately, many people lack the skills of our friend Bonnie. As a result, a variety of negative results can take place as they fail to act capably as meeting facilitators. Here are some signs that there's “Trouble in River City” in a meeting:

- An argument starts about an established fact
- Opinions are introduced as if they were truths
- People intimidate others with real or imaginary “knowledge”
- People overwhelm each other with too many proposals for the time available to consider them
- People become angry for no good reason
- People promote their own visions at the expense of everyone else's
- People demand or offer much more information than is needed

- Discussion becomes circular; people repeat themselves without making any progress toward conclusions

If you've experienced any of these symptoms of a poorly-facilitated meeting, you realize how demoralizing they can be for a group.

## Guidelines for Facilitating a Meeting

Barge (Barge, J.K. (1991, November). Task skills and competence in group leadership. Paper presented at the meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Atlanta, GA), Lumsden and Lumsden (Lumsden, G., & Lumsden, D. (2004). *Communicating in groups and teams: Sharing leadership* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning), and Parker and Hoffman (Parker, G., & Hoffman, R. (2006). *Meeting excellence: 33 tools to lead meetings that get results*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass) are among many authorities who have recommended actions and attitudes which can help you facilitate a meeting well. Here are several such suggestions, taken partly from these writers' works and partly from the authors' experiences as facilitators and participants in meetings over the years:

### Start Promptly... Always

Some time, calculate the cost to your group—even at minimum-wage rates—for the minutes its members sit around waiting for meetings to begin. You may occasionally be delayed for good reasons, but if you're chronically late you'll eventually aggravate folks who've arrived on time—the very ones whose professionalism you'd particularly like to reinforce and praise. Consistently starting on time may even boost morale: “Early in, early out” will probably appeal to most of a group's members, since they are likely to have other things they need to do as soon as a meeting ends.

### Begin With Something Positive

Face it: no matter what you do, many people in your group would probably rather be somewhere else than in a meeting. If you'd like them to overcome this familiar aversion and get pumped up about what you'll be doing in a meeting, therefore, you might emulate the practice of City Year, a Boston-based nonprofit international service organization. City Year begins its meetings by inviting members to describe from their own recent life experiences an example of what Robert F. Kennedy referred to as a “ripple of hope.” (Grossman, J. (1998, April). We've got to start meeting like this. *Inc.*, 70–74). This could be a good deed they've seen someone do for someone else, a news item about a decline in the crime rate, or perhaps even a loving note they've received from a child or other family member. Sharing with their fellow group members such examples of altruism, love, or community improvement focuses and motivates City Year members by reminding them in specific, personal terms of why their meetings can be truly worthwhile.

### Tend to Housekeeping Details

People's productivity depends in part on their biological state. Once you convene your meeting, announce or remind the group members of where they can find rest rooms, water fountains, vending machines, designated smoking areas, and any other amenities that may contribute to their physical comfort.

### Make Sure People Understand Their Roles

At the start of the meeting, review what you understand is going to happen and ask for confirmation of what you think people are expected to do in the time you're going to be spending together. Calling on someone to make a report if he or she isn't aware it's required can be embarrassing for both you and that person.

### Keep to Your Agenda

Social time makes people happy and relieves stress. Most group meetings, however, should not consist primarily of social time. You may want to designate a “sheriff”—rotating the role at each meeting—to watch for departures from the agenda and courteously direct people back on task. Either you or the “sheriff” might want to periodically provide “signposts” indicating where you are in your process, too, such as “It looks like we've got 25 minutes left in our meeting, and we haven't discussed yet who's going to be working on the report to give to Mary.”

If your meetings habitually exceed the time you allot for them, consider either budgeting more time or, if you want to stick to your guns, setting a kitchen timer to ring when you've reached the point when you've said you'll quit. The co-founder of one technology firm, Jeff Atwood, put together a list of rules for his company's meetings which included this one: “No meeting should ever be more than an hour, under penalty of death.” (Milian, M. (2012, June 11-June 17). It's not you, it's meetings. *Bloomberg*

*Businessweek*, 51–52). Similarly, the library staff at one college in the Midwest conducts all their meetings standing up in a circle, which encourages brevity and efficiency.

### Guide, Don't Dictate

If you're in charge of the meeting, that doesn't mean you're responsible for everything people say in it, nor does it mean you have to personally comment on every idea or proposal that comes up. Let the other members of the group carry the content as long as they're not straying from the process you feel needs to be followed.

You may see that some people regularly dominate discussion in your group's meetings and that others are perhaps slower to talk despite having important contributions to make. One way to deal with these disparities is by providing the group with a "talking stick" and specifying that people must hold it in their hands in order to speak. You could also invoke the "NOSTUESO rule" with respect to the talking stick, which says that "No One Speaks Twice Until Everybody Speaks Once."

### Keep Your Eyes Open For Nonverbal Communication

As a meeting progresses, people's physical and emotional states are likely to change. As the facilitator, you should do your best to identify such change and accommodate it within the structures and processes your group has established for itself. When people do something as simple as crossing their arms in front of them, for instance, they might be signaling that they're closed to what others are saying—or they might just be trying to stay warm in a room that feels too cold to them.

When one person in the meeting has the floor and is talking, it's a good idea to watch how the rest of the group seems to be responding. You may notice clues indicating that people are pleased and receptive, or that they're uninterested, skeptical, or even itching to respond negatively. You may want to do a perception check to see if you're interpreting nonverbal cues accurately. For instance, you might say, "Terry, could we pause here a bit? I get the impression that people might have some questions for you." As an alternative, you might address the whole group and ask "Does anyone have questions for Terry at this point?"

### Capture and Assign Action Items

Unless they are held purely to communicate information, or for other special purposes, most meetings result in action items, tasks, and other assignments for one or more participants. Sometimes these items arise unexpectedly because someone comes up with a great new idea and volunteers or is assigned to pursue it after the discussion ends. Be on the alert for these elements of a meeting.

### Make things Fun and Healthy

Appeal to people's tummies and funnybones. Provide something to eat or drink, even if it's just coffee or peanuts in a bowl. Glenn Parker and George Hoffman's book on how to run meetings well (Parker, G., & Hoffman, R. (2006). *Meeting excellence: 33 tools to lead meetings that get results*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass) includes a chapter titled "Eating Well=Meeting Well," and it also refers to the fact that the American Cancer Society offers a program to help groups organize meetings and other events with good health in mind. [www.cancer.org/healthy/morewaysacshelpsyoustaywell/meeting-well-description](http://www.cancer.org/healthy/morewaysacshelpsyoustaywell/meeting-well-description)

### Avoid Sarcasm and Cynicism

Encourage humor and merriment. If your agenda includes some challenging items, try to start out with "quick wins" to warm the mood of the group.

### Take Breaks Regularly, Even When You Think You Don't Need Them

If you've ever gone on a long hike on a beautiful day, you may have decided to continue a mile or two beyond your original intended destination because the scenery was beautiful and you were feeling spunky. If you're like the authors, though, you probably regretted "going the extra mile" later because it meant you had to go back that mile plus all the rest of the way you'd come.

Something similar can arise in a meeting. People sometimes feel full of energy and clamor to keep a lively discussion going past the time scheduled for a break, but they may not realize that they're tiring and losing focus until someone says or does something ill-advised. Taking even five-minute breathers at set intervals can help group members remain physically refreshed over the long haul.

### Show Respect for Everyone

Seek consensus. Avoid "groupthink" by encouraging a free and full airing of opinions. Observe the Golden Rule. Listen sincerely to everyone, but avoid giving a small minority so much clout that in disputed matters "99-to-1 is a tie." Keep disagreements

agreeable. If you must criticize, criticize positions, not people. If someone's behavior shows a pattern of consistently irritating others or disrupting the flow of your group's meetings, talk to the person privately and express your concern in a polite but clear fashion. Be specific in stating what you expect the person to do or stop doing, and keep an open mind to whatever response you receive.

### Expect the Unexpected

Do your best to anticipate and prepare for confrontations and conflicts. If you didn't already make time to do so earlier, take a minute just before the start of the meeting to mark items on your agenda which you think might turn out to be especially contentious or time-consuming.

### Conduct Multiple Assessments of the Meeting

Formative assessment takes place during an activity and allows people to modify their behavior in response to its results. Why not perform a brief interim evaluation during every meeting in which you ask, for instance, "If we were to end this meeting right now, where would it be, and if we need to make changes now in what's happening in our meeting, what should they be?"

Summative assessment is implemented at the end of an activity. When you finish a meeting, for example, you might check to see how well people feel that the gathering met its intended goals. If you want something in writing, you might distribute a half sheet of paper to each person asking "What was best about our meeting?" and "What might have made this meeting better?" Or you could write two columns on a whiteboard, one with a plus and the other with a minus, and ask people orally to identify items they think belong in each category. If you feel a less formal check-up is sufficient, you might just go around the table or room and ask every person for one word that captures how she or he feels.

### Think (and Talk) Ahead

If you didn't write it on your agenda—which would have been a good idea, most likely—remind group members, before the meeting breaks up, of where and when their next gathering is to take place.

### Tips For Virtual Meetings

Meetings conducted via Skype or other synchronous technological tools can function as efficiently as face-to-face ones, but only if the distinctive challenges of the virtual environment are taken into account. It's harder to develop empathy with other people, and easier to engage in unhelpful multitasking, when you're not in the same physical space with them. To make it more likely that a virtual meeting will be both pleasant and productive, then, it makes sense to tell people upfront what your expectations are of their behavior. If you want them to avoid reading emails or playing computer solitaire on their computers while the meeting is underway, for example, say so.

A major goal of most meetings is to reach decisions based on maximum involvement, so it pays to keep in mind that people work best with other people whom they know and understand. With this in mind, you might choose to email a photo of each person scheduled to be in the meeting and include a quick biography for everyone to look over in advance. This communication could take place along with disseminating the meeting's agenda and other supporting documentation.

Here are some further tips and suggestions for leading or participating in virtual meetings, each based on the unique features of such gatherings:

1. Get all the participants in an audio meeting to say something brief at the start of the meeting so that everyone becomes familiar with everyone else's voice
2. Remind people of the purpose of the meeting and of the key outcome(s) you hope to achieve together
3. Listen/watch for people who aren't participating and ask them periodically if they have thoughts or suggestions to add to the discussion
4. Summarize the status of the meeting from time to time
5. If you're holding an audio conference, discourage people from calling in on a cell phone because of potential problems with sound quality
6. Because you may not have nonverbal cues to refer to, ask other members to clarify their meanings and intentions if you're not sure their words alone convey all you need to know
7. If you know you're going to have to leave a meeting before it ends, inform the organizer in advance. Sign off publicly, but quickly, when you leave rather than just hanging up on the meeting connection.

## Key Takeaway

Facilitating a meeting well requires a large number of skills and talents and depends on overcoming many potential pitfalls, but following specific recommendations from authorities on the subject can make it possible.

### Exercise 4.3.1

1. Reread the description of Bonnie's abilities. With a partner, list the abilities and rank them in what you feel is their order of importance. Which of the abilities, if any, do you feel are absolutely essential to successful leadership of meetings?
2. Which instances of "Trouble in River City" have you experienced in group meetings? Describe two or three such instances. What action might the group leader have taken to prevent or resolve the episodes?
3. Some cultures value exact punctuality differently from others. If you were leading a series of meetings comprising members of several cultural groups, what steps, if any, would you take to accommodate or modify people's habits and expectations concerning the starting and ending times of the meetings?
4. Imagine that you're the new chairperson of a group that got seriously off track in the first of its meetings that you presided over. You tried gently redirecting people to discuss pertinent issues, but they first ignored and then resisted your attempts. What steps might you take to address the situation?

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