

FACILITATING YOUR WAY OUT OF THE MEETING MIRE

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HAVE YOU EVER . . .

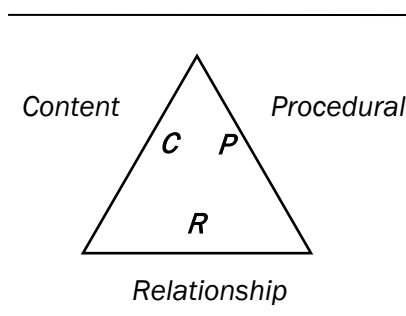
- Attended meetings that had no focus and no end point?
- Tried to participate in meetings where the same people always monopolize the time?
- Left a meeting with a totally different idea of what went on than the person who sat next to you?
- Been exasperated because people came to your meetings late, were not prepared, or left early?
- Sat in meetings where issues that needed to be discussed were not brought up because it was not safe to do so?
- Gone to a great meeting with lively discussion, but no action plans resulted or people did not follow through afterward?

Experiences like these can be frustrating whether you are the meeting leader or in the participant role. Typically, such scenarios cause people to respond in a way that only serves to further compound the problem. For example, everyone decides to be late to meetings because they never start on time.

FULFILLING NEEDS

Each person has a set of needs that must be met in order for that individual to agree to an approach, to buy-in to a decision, or to support an action plan. These needs form a triangle that is in balance. If any side is neglected, then the balance is thrown off and the agreement, or buy-in, diminishes. It is easy to see in this example that if:

- There is no clearly defined process for developing a plan (P), the team may not buy-in to the budget (C).
- Contributors to the plan hedge on committing to writing assignment deadlines (C), the coordinator may feel unfairly treated (R).
- The review process is perceived to be punitive or critical (R), then there is likelihood that the plan will be late and there will be no time for sufficient review (C).



C	Content Need (<i>The What, Time, Money, Resources</i>) When is the proposal due? How many hours are budgeted?
P	Procedural Need (<i>The How, the Process</i>) How will we edit the proposal sections written by different authors?
R	Relationship Need (<i>The Who, the Communication, the Behavior</i>) Who is going to be doing the final review on the proposal and how will the input be viewed?

Keeping the triangle in balance has been an approach that has been used successfully for many years by facilitators in effective meeting facilitation, conflict resolution, and mediation.

HOW CAN THE FACILITATION APPROACH ASSIST YOU IN SERVING YOUR CLIENTS?

Building your own tool kit of facilitation skills greatly enhances the value any professional brings to the role of serving internal and external clients. The facilitation approach enhances the effectiveness and productivity of the following typical business activities:

- Helping clients identify their needs and work through complex decisions.
- Building and reinforcing consistent, reasonable go/no-go processes.
- Holding focused and creative strategy sessions.
- Developing realistic, implementable business and marketing strategic plans.
- Encouraging focused image development programs.
- Running productive regular team meetings.

WHEN MIGHT I NEED A FACILITATOR?

Although chosen on a case-by-case basis, some of the situations that might indicate the need for a facilitator include:

- Controversial meeting topics resulting in defined camps on “opposing” sides.
- Meeting leader needs to be an active participant in the meeting and focused on content.
- Purpose of the meeting is to increase buy-in, but meeting leader tends to be directive.
- Participants do not trust each other and require a facilitator to provide a “safe” environment.
- Meeting objectives and process are complex, which require a clear, neutral focus to keep the process on track.

In these cases, the roles and responsibilities of the meeting leader and facilitator are generally split as follows:

Meeting Leader

Focuses on the content

Defines the desired outcomes

Defines the level of decision making

Participates in meeting

Delegates procedural function to facilitator

Facilitator

Focuses on the process

Designs the process to attain the outcomes

Balances the participation

Is neutral on the content

Maintains an open, safe environment

As it is not always possible to have a facilitator for every meeting, there is an obvious challenge for a facilitative leader to be neutral and involved in the meeting content at the same time. Despite this phenomenon, the group needs only to look to one person for direction to avoid potential confusion.

This discussion of the facilitation approach, however, will focus primarily on the separation of the facilitator and meeting leader roles.

FIVE BENEFITS THE FACILITATION APPROACH BRINGS TO MEETINGS

1. Achieving Stated Meeting Goals and Desired Outcomes

Alice: Cheshire Puss, would you tell me please which way I ought to go from here?

CP: That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.

Alice: I don't much care where . . .

CP: Then it doesn't matter which way you go.

Lewis Carroll from Alice in Wonderland

It is little wonder that meetings get off track or people believe they are wasting their time when there are no clear meeting goals. Pre-meeting preparation is the first of the facilitator's tools. Prior to designing a meeting process, a facilitator will sit down with the meeting leader to identify key objectives by discussing the Checklist.

This process is more effective for standalone meetings. If used for standing meetings, such as team meetings that utilize virtually the same agenda each week, the process is in jeopardy of becoming ineffective. Responding to the pre-meeting checklist will signal the facilitator to determine:

- Is the meeting really needed?
- Are the right people invited?
- What are the likely dynamics?
- Is the decision-making level appropriate?
- Is the meeting length realistic?
- Can the meeting be effectively facilitated?

2. Keeping the Process on Track

Meetings tend to fail in inverse proportion to preparation time and direct proportion to meeting time.

George David Heiffer

Facilitators are called upon, many times, just to keep a meeting on track. Unfortunately, the track itself is often undefined, so the participants have their own subjective view of what is on or off track. Designing the road map for the group to follow is the facilitator's primary role that, in turn, will achieve the stated goals and outcomes. The design is then presented as an agenda.

3. Road Map to Success

When schemes are laid out in advance, it is surprising how often the circumstances fit in with them.

Sir William Oster

The essential items on the pre-meeting and agenda checklists are mostly common sense but, unfortunately, not common practice. A logical flow of items is not always followed. It is very easy to get off track in a go/no-go meeting by first focusing on how qualified the firm is for a particular project. Sound reasonable? A different approach might be to begin by clearly defining the client's needs and the depth of the firm's relationship with that client.

Attempting to squeeze too many items into the time allowed will result in the session running overtime or not achieving the meeting goals and objectives. The facilitator's job is to share options for extending the meeting time or reducing the number of items addressed. It is up to the meeting leader and the participants to decide which items are to be placed on the agenda - the participants own the agenda, not the facilitator.

An opening and closing sequence will assist in developing, from the start, a common understanding of the meeting process. Following this process ensures that participants will leave with clear decisions, action plans, assignments, and follow up. With the process clearly identified, the facilitator has the road map with which to keep the meeting on track.

4. Managing Human Dynamics Effectively

Our senses are the camera lens through which we view the world. Our point of view is limited to what our perspective sees.

Anonymous

Everyone comes into a meeting with their own ideas, beliefs, values, and assumptions regarding the meeting and about how people should behave. These assumptions may vary widely and may be in conflict with other participants' views of the world. One of the most powerful tools a facilitator uses to manage human dynamics is to get the group, at the start of the meeting, to agree on a common code of behavior. The group, then, establishes meeting guidelines or groundrules. An experienced facilitator will identify potential disruptive dynamics in the pre-meeting preparation, and guide the creation of groundrules to prevent them from affecting the group during the meeting. For example, if it is known that certain individuals tend to dominate or interrupt others, the facilitator would include groundrules such as “no interruptions” or “one person talks at a time”. This enables the facilitator to control that person in the meeting without them legitimately becoming upset, because they have agreed to abide by the code. If no groundrule was stipulated, then the group has essentially not given the facilitator the power to intervene.

An accomplished facilitator knows when to enact an intervention when disruptive behavior is expressed. Obviously, prevention would be preferable and, in most cases, can be achieved by getting everyone to agree to the up-front groundrules.

Examples of escalated interventions:

Level 1	Remind people of the groundrules when they are violated.
Level 2	Review the groundrules and the purposes of the meeting and gain agreement to get back on track, or revise groundrules if they are not working.
Level 3	Take a break and caucus with the disruptive parties to get agreement that the meeting will continue with their cooperation.
Level 4	Stop the meeting, and reconvene, if the behavior is preventing the meeting from continuing productively.

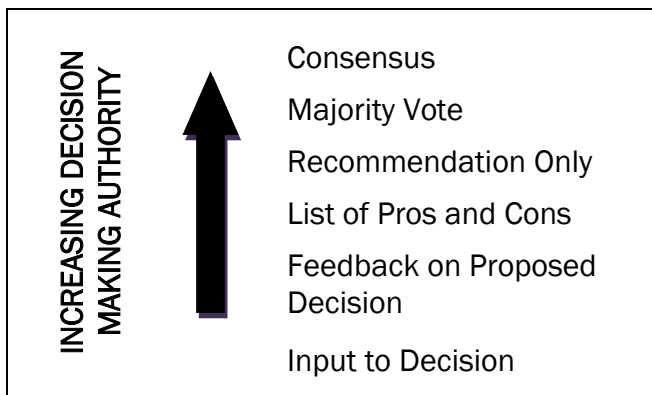
In order to effectively handle escalated interventions, a facilitator (one who is not the meeting leader) is the best choice to intervene. Participants are more likely to see the facilitator as neutral and not influenced in any one direction. One of the most critical elements to the success of a meeting is the ability of the facilitator to provide an open and safe environment. Failing to do so will result in damage to the facilitator's credibility with the group.

5. Achieving High Participant Buy-In and Follow Through

People are usually more convinced by reasons they discovered themselves than those found by others.

Blaise Pascal

Participant buy-in to a process or decision depends dramatically on their initial expectation of involvement in the process. There can be high buy-in to a decision where a participant only made an initial contribution to the process and someone else made the decision, as long as that involvement was known and accepted from the start. Complete consensus is not required for every decision in order for there to be buy-in. Trouble occurs when participants are given to understand that they should make a decision, only to find that the decision is overturned. Why? Perhaps what was really sought was only a recommendation. A critical role of the facilitator is in helping the meeting leader define the group's true level of decision-making authority.



The facilitator then clarifies that decision-making role to the participants in order to get a common understanding of the expectations. The level of decision making also affects the meeting design. A facilitator would not ask for a vote on which markets a firm should be making investments in if the meeting leader only wants a brainstormed list of potential markets to be prioritized by a different group or individual.

Getting commitment and follow through to an action plan at the end of a meeting is stressful at best. If you consider the dynamics at the end of a meeting, it is easy to understand why. People are tired - they are thinking about the next meeting or getting back to their latest pressing deadlines. Generally,

meeting leaders do not allow enough meeting time to define an action plan to get commitment. A facilitator will be focusing on developing the action plan throughout the meeting and not wait until the end.

If this process is left to the end, there are two potential outcomes:

- When action steps and assignments are solicited, there may be resistance to commitment resulting in pressure being applied and reduced buy-in.
- Time will run out, people will leave with no clear implementation and follow-up plan, and the issues will have to be revisited at the next meeting.

MEASURING SUCCESS

The facilitator has four basic questions to be answered by the group for every action step:

1. **What** specifically is to be done? (C)
2. **When** is the deadline? (C)
3. **Who** is taking the lead? Who needs to be involved? (R)
4. **How** will you know that it has been done? How will its progress/completion be monitored? (P)

Laying this basic groundwork is especially critical in strategic planning where some annual plans sit on the shelf until next year's meeting when they are revisited for the first time. In most cases, it is because critical questions were not answered with regard to proposed tactics and actions. In the end, the best indicators of the facilitation approach's success are if participants:

- Believe they accomplished their goals themselves
- Feel good about how the meeting process was conducted

You may want to consider a facilitator for your next controversial topic or important planning session—the results may be well worth your investment in time, compensation and effort.

Pre-Meeting Checklist

- What is the purpose of the meeting? (C)
- What do you want to have at the end of the meeting? (C)
- What actions or decisions need to be made? (C)
- Who needs to be involved and/or make decisions? (P)
- What are the historical relationships within the group? (R)
- What are the roles of the attendees? (R)
- How long a meeting is anticipated? (C)
- Where will the meeting be held? (C)
- What needs to be prepared ahead of time? (P)

Agenda Checklist

- Identify the what, how, who, and when for each item (C)
- Place items in a logical flow (P)
- Start and end with easy items (R)
- Estimate item times from the bottom up (C)
- Include opening and closing sequence (P)
- Allow for break times in longer meetings (C)

TYPICAL MEETING GROUNDRULES

- No interruptions, one person speaks at a time (P)
- No side conversations (P)
- No evaluation of ideas during brainstorming (P)
- Respect other points of view (R)
- Be on time after breaks (C) No ins and outs (P)
- No cell phones (P)
- It is OK to speak up if the meeting gets off-track (R)