

Designing and Leading Meetings that Matter

Efficient, successful meetings are vital to the success of any team-oriented collaboration. Here, John Baker shares his insight into making your meetings matter.

by John D. Baker



Most of us spend a good portion of our work life in meetings: staff meetings, team meetings, program meetings, planning meetings. The list is endless. And a good number of us find the majority of these meetings unproductive, or worse. In some of these meetings we are unwilling participants but in others, shockingly, we are in charge, i.e., they are meetings of our own making.

What's surprising is how we assume that bad meetings are a fact of life. I even saw a recent business article that touted limiting participation in meetings to 15 minutes as an effective strategy for increasing productivity! Although huge changes have occurred in our workplaces, meeting "technology" has not changed with the times. I've run my share of less than stellar meetings in the past. But over 10 years ago, as I launched my consulting career, I sought out and discovered a plethora of facilitation trainings and techniques that help dramatically alter the process and outcomes of meetings. I want to share a few ideas to help you create meetings that matter.

Leadership Styles

As context for what follows, the leadership style you use when you convene a meeting is extremely important. Our society's dominant

leadership style is hierarchical. The image of leadership within a hierarchical organization is of someone who knows the right answer, who has personal expertise and knowledge, who knows what should be done. This style is useful in many situations where command and control are needed, where situations call for someone to be in charge. But many modern meeting environments require us to assume a facilitative leadership style if we are to be effective.

The facilitative leader knows methods to help a group make decisions that the group owns and will implement. They know the right answer will emerge through the sharing and melding of the diverse points of view. This style takes advantage of the greater complexity and diversity that we encounter in today's world. Indeed, when we are asked to work together, it is often with people who share extremely diverse points of view, based on cultural backgrounds, varied life histories and personal experiences and individual skills. These situations require a different stance toward leading, one that taps into the collective wisdom of the group, as well as the creativity of the individuals involved. It calls for a participatory approach led by someone who sees themselves as a guide, not the person with the answers.

Successful Strategies

So here are some ways to design and lead a meeting as a facilitative leader:

In addition to deciding the aim or goal of the meeting, think also about the experience or feeling you want to create as a result of the meeting. For instance, in conducting strategic planning, agencies often want to decide what they should focus on in the coming year. But if there is also a great deal of mistrust between two different groups in the organization, then bridging the trust divide becomes an equally compelling outcome of the meeting. If I don't think about both the rational and the experiential goals of the meeting, I'm missing a key component of the group's dynamics that will affect whether anything actually gets done.

The next suggestion is to pose a question that the meeting will answer. Write it quite large and post it at the beginning of the meeting and refer to it often. A group's natural tendency is to go off on tangents, to lose focus. Posting a "focus question" helps steer the conversation back to the topic at hand when the conversation starts to veer out of control.

To begin a meeting I always ask groups what anticipations they brought with them to the meeting. This helps me

refine the agenda and ensure that something big isn't ignored. It also conveys that this really is their meeting and my role is to help ensure that their expectations are met.

A common question I'm asked is how to get a lot of ideas into the room without becoming overwhelmed or lost in a whirlwind. I invite people to individually brainstorm, by doing a "brain dump" and writing down all the ideas they have that answer the focus question. I then ask them to share these ideas. Writing down ideas privately first allows more divergent ideas to come into the room. Individuals don't fall prey to "group think." Additionally, since everyone has already written down their ideas, they can listen better as others talk.

It is not uncommon for energy to vary during the course of a meeting. Like any human process, meetings have an ebb and flow. So how do you keep people engaged? Whenever I feel the energy dragging, I immediately break the discussion into small groups. Small groups can be pairs, triads or larger, depending on the size of the whole group. This also helps avoid a few individuals dominating the conversation.

In small groups, you've leveled the playing field and allowed multiple people to talk at the same time, in a closer, more intimate (and safer) environment. Suddenly, more ideas are getting into the room quicker. I then ask for small reports from each group that capture a few key points that came up during the small group discussion.

Try some of these ideas the next time you're meeting with your partner agencies to better coordinate services. With a little more up front planning, you can indeed create a meeting that matters.

The Community Transportation Association is offering a Webinar about Designing Meetings that Matter on Tuesday, February 26 from 2:00 - 3:15 p.m. EST. To register, visit "Employment Transportation" at www.ctaa.org/ntrc.



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