
APPENDIX 2

Tips for Consultants and Facilitators

One of the most challenging consulting tasks is to facilitate a meeting for a company. Many companies think this is easy work to do and, consequently, expect miracles to happen. When the meeting does not accomplish what was hoped for, it is easy to blame the consultant or facilitator. There is also an information asymmetry. The consultant/facilitator is not privy to group norms and interpersonal dynamics. Many companies expect consultants to immediately dissect the motives of each member. Many mistakes are made prior to the beginning of the meeting. Often, teams that need outside facilitators are besieged by thorny political and personnel issues. Even the issue of who hires the consultant can be a political one. Others may see the consultant as a hired gun.

What can an outside facilitator do to make the most out of meetings?

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Find out as much as you can about the group, the company, and the individual members before the meeting. Ideally, interview the members of the group individually, either by phone, in person, or via a short questionnaire to determine their views of the issues to be addressed in the meeting and their major concerns about the ability of the meeting to accomplish these objectives. Of course, you should guarantee each person that you will not reveal the particulars of what they have said. If you plan to provide a summary overview, tell each person that. This is your first meeting with each team member, and trust is a key issue in getting the information that you need and securing your future relationship with the group. At the very least, get biographies of the group members and ask them how long they've been with the organization, their role in the team, and so on. I find it useful to ask them to map out the team's reporting relationships—it reveals how they think about the group.

PLAN THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Most people seriously underestimate the effect that the physical environment can have on the nature of interaction. Consequently, I am a stickler for this. In many cases, I will create explicit diagrams of where the chairs and tables should be put and fax this to the

meeting coordinator several weeks in advance. It is usually too late to move furniture by the time you arrive for the meeting; people will want to talk to you, not rearrange the room. Your key materials for the meeting should include a room large enough for people to sit comfortably; movable chairs; conference-table seating for small groups; half-rounds, or full-rounds for larger groups; a post-its pad of paper or note cards for each member and a pencil or pen; two or three flip charts; and a whiteboard or a chalkboard. It is useful to also have an overhead projector. If you don't know the group, ask for name badges or nameplates that are computer printed. Usually, it is impossible to read handwriting on nametags unless you are standing only two feet away, and you will probably be about 15 to 20 feet away.

EXPLAIN WHO YOU ARE AND WHY YOU ARE THERE

Begin the meeting by stating why you are there. You will be viewed as an outsider, or interloper, to the group. This creates tension. People will often feel defensive, paranoid, and suspicious of what is to come. You should immediately state that you are there to facilitate the process and to help the group make the best use of their time, and that you do not have a particular stake in the substantive issues. In most cases, you should be clear about who asked you to come in. Above all, don't assume that the reasons for hiring a meeting facilitator have been accurately communicated to the group. Even if a memo was sent out, it may not have been read. Some people may feel strongly opposed to an outside facilitator. Tell the group who you are, but don't try to impress them. You can also "normalize" the situation by giving them statistics that support the idea that making the best use of meetings is of quintessential importance and that even the best organizations are not experts at meeting management. The objective is to give them confidence that you are qualified to do this job. Often, the group will feel somewhat defensive that they need to hire someone to manage themselves.

FIND OUT WHO THE GROUP IS

You know who the individual members are, but the group will have its own personality. This is extremely tricky. The group members, in most cases, will know one another intimately, but you will not know them.

If the group members do not know one another well, it is useful for everyone to introduce themselves. If the group members do know one another well, having members talk about themselves is boring for other people. In this case, a useful technique is the **next-in-line strategy**, in which members introduce others in the group. For example, each person introduces the person to their left. This is more interesting for group members because they hear, perhaps for the first time, how they are viewed by others. This also serves as an icebreaker, because members are often flattered at the admiration given to them by others. (Often, people sit by others whom they like, so having someone introduce the person sitting next to them ensures a favorable introduction.)

EXHIBIT A2-1 Meeting Ground Rules

- Everyone stays for duration of meeting.
- Form an agenda and stick to it.
- Form a time line and stick to it.
- No “new business.”
- No semantic/philosophical discussions.
- No “let’s call for more information” (decision avoidance).
- No evaluation of ideas until evaluation period.
- No more reports.

USE GROUND RULES

It is imperative to let the group know that you will be using and enforcing meeting ground rules. You may want to acknowledge that the ground rules may seem somewhat silly or reminiscent of their school days, but that companies that use these ground rules are more effective. If you have the time, it is best to have the group suggest some ground rules, so that they “own” them. If you don’t have the time, you can write some rules quickly on a flip chart and briefly walk through it with the members. An example list of ground rules is presented in Exhibit A2-1. You may not want to use all of these, but they give you a starting point from which members can add their own rules (or modify the ones on the list).

The most difficult challenge facing the consultant is enforcing the ground rules. They will get broken, and the temptation will be to excuse or ignore rule-breaking behavior. However, it is imperative to demonstrate that you will enforce these ground rules. You should actually do this early on in the meeting (e.g., “Pat, I need to remind you that we agreed to not mention personal names when talking about the peer review,” or “Stan, your five minutes are up.”).

CREATE AN AGENDA

You should ideally have an agenda that is distributed to members in advance of the meeting. Expect to be challenged on the agenda either directly (e.g., “If you don’t mind, I want to bring up x, y, and z”) or indirectly (e.g., “Don’t you think we should talk about x, y, and z before we do this?”). The best way of handling this is to create a postdiscussion agenda and explain that there may be time for these issues after the scheduled meeting.

CLOSING THE MEETING

It is important to bring the meeting to a close in a way that gives the members a sense of what has been accomplished and decided, what steps need to be taken before the next meeting, and what the goal of the next meeting will be (which should be scheduled

with everyone present). Finally, you should close in a way that allows each member to “briefly and deeply” reflect on the meeting. Each one of the agenda items should be recapped, and homework or follow-up should be assigned to individual members. A summary of decision and action items should be distributed as soon as possible to the group. I like to spend the last five to 10 minutes going around and having each person say the one thing that happened today that they “did not expect” (otherwise everyone will state the obvious, like “we got a lot done” or “the time passed quickly”).

SOLICIT FEEDBACK FOR YOURSELF AND THE GROUP

This step is important, especially if you have not worked with the group in the past. Distribute to each participant a short questionnaire that asks the following questions: (1) What in this meeting went well and should be kept? (2) What in this meeting did not go so well and should be eliminated? (3) What in this meeting did not happen and should be included?¹ If you will be working with the group again, aggregate the list of responses and circulate it among group members.

¹Tropman, J. E. (2003). *Making meetings work: Achieving high quality group decisions* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.