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How to Facilitate a Meeting

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What is a Facilitator?

The facilitator is the person in charge of the meeting. They move the meeting along.

The Facilitator is Responsible for:

- Getting agreement on agenda and processes before and during the meeting
- Conducting the meeting - makes sure the group keeps to ground rules, time limits, etc.
- Guiding discussion
- Staying neutral, asking questions and suggesting ways to approach parts of the agenda
- Making sure the group comes to decisions and work is divided among members
- Keeping the group on track when they head off onto tangents
- Watching the vibe of the meeting and helping to keep energy up
- Making sure everyone participates and no one dominates
- Creating a safe and positive environment (protects people from personal attack)

- Intervening if problems come up, dealing with concerns
- Creating a comfortable environment - using language that makes everyone comfortable

Strategies for Good Facilitation

- Ask person who put specific item on agenda to give a brief introduction on important background information and what they want done
- Give 5 minute warnings when moving on to another agenda item. Appoint a separate timekeeper if necessary.
- Put off off-subject topics - Create a list (a "parking lot") for items to be discussed at another time
- Paraphrase (repeat back in your own words) to check for the sense of the discussion
- Help people avoid repeating themselves by summarizing discussion and asking only for comments in areas that haven't been mentioned
- Make suggestions for how to move forward - after discussion has gone on for a while, try to summarize, look for agreement or sticking points, and come to decision
- Ask questions
- Be positive and encourage full participation - make sure everyone gets to speak, try to notice when someone is holding back
- Focus on issues, not personalities
- Ask someone else to facilitate if you want to actively participate in the discussion
- Check briefly for agreement before moving on - make sure everyone understands decisions

Techniques for making decisions in meetings

- Brainstorming
- Prioritizing (ranking items)
- Pro's and Con's
- Straw voting (informal poll to see where people are)
- Going around to everyone to check for the sense of the group This resource sheet was developed with help from CompassPoint Non-Profit Services

Suggested Wording for Facilitating a Meeting (from the North American Students of Cooperation Cooperative Education and Training Institute)

1. Make sure each agenda item is introduced by the person responsible for it. This way everyone understands why the item is being discussed. The introduction should include: what information everyone needs to know and what needs to be decided, and possibly pro's and con's.

Jane, could you please give us a little background on this issue and tell us what action you are requesting?

2. Make sure everyone has a chance to speak.

I've noticed a few people have been saying a lot on this issue; before hearing any more from them, is there anyone who hasn't spoken yet who has something to add?

3. Encourage everyone to say what's on their mind. Try to notice when people are holding back; that could make it hard for them to come to a decision later.

I sense some hesitancy from folks to speak openly on this issue; it's important we hear all points of view, so I encourage everyone to be honest about their feelings.

4. Make sure people speak only on the matter at hand. If other issues come up, keep track of them on a "parallel agenda" and let people know that the group will return to this agenda before the end of the meeting.

Joe, you're raising some good points and I've noted them here; we'll come back to them before the end of the meeting, but let's focus more directly on the issue at hand.

5. Encourage people to avoid repeating themselves and others by summarizing discussion periodically.

So far, I've heard the following objections raised... The arguments in favor of the proposal seem to be... I've heard people propose the following possible solutions...

6. Keep the meeting moving along. Remind people of time and appoint a timekeeper if necessary. If designated time runs out, ask the group to agree to spend more time on the issue, postpone it until later in the meeting, or put the discussion off until another meeting.

We're about to run out of the designated time on this issue. Is there agreement to spend another ten minutes to get a few more ideas on the table and make a decision now, or should we postpone a final decision until our next meeting?

7. Encourage the group to take a break to restore energy or ease tension.

I'm seeing a few people "resting their eyes." Would anybody object to a five minute break to get

up and stretch and get some fresh air?

8. After a topic has been discussed for a while, start trying to move the group toward agreement by summarizing discussion points, looking for common points of agreement, identifying sources of conflict, etc.

I'm hearing most people agree with...but there seems to be a few points of view on...Perhaps we could focus on how to agree on these last few issues.

9. Know when the group has reached a decision. Also know when a group cannot reach a decision; suggest postponing a decision when. . .

- the group needs critical information
- the group needs to hear from others
- the group is not prepared

I'd like to propose we postpone this discussion because...

10. Make sure everyone understands the decision.

Could we briefly summarize the proposal that's being decided right now?

11. If you want to participate actively in the discussion, ask someone else to take over facilitating the meeting. If you have a quick personal comment, signal to the group that this comment comes from you personally.

I'm recognizing myself as speaker. (Stand up or take some other physical action to distinguish you are not speaking as facilitator.)

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