

Use Proven Facilitation Tools to Manage Difficult Meetings

Hinda K. Sterling
Herbert L. Selesnick

The logo for Sterling Selesnick, INC. It features a large, stylized ampersand (&) in a light blue color. Overlaid on the ampersand is the text "Sterling Selesnick, INC" in a white, sans-serif font. The word "Sterling" is on the top line, "Selesnick," is on the second line, and "INC" is on the third line, positioned to the right of the comma.

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■ WHAT FACILITATIVE MEETING LEADERS MUST BE ABLE TO DO

The growing involvement of *ad hoc* teams in work process improvement efforts has spawned a relatively new set of skills among managers—namely, meeting facilitation skills. Effective managers are increasingly those people who are capable of fostering organizational change and work process improvement by using facilitation techniques to make team meetings productive.

Facilitative meeting leaders must be good organizers and communicators, with special expertise in group dynamics. They need to ensure that there is two-way expressive involvement which emphasizes active listening as well as trusting communication among the meeting participants. They should ensure that meetings are planned, organized, focused, disciplined and monitored. They must have (or develop) patience, a high tolerance for ambiguity, and a sense of timing that helps them know when to push for more ideas, information or participation, and when *not* to push. And they should have the ability to organize activities, handle details and bring events to closure.

Below is a description of meeting facilitation techniques, skills and behaviors. No matter what your current level of change management skill, periodically reviewing these techniques and practicing their use will make you a more confident and effective meeting leader and a consistently successful initiator and manager of constructive organizational change.

■ HOW A FACILITATIVE MEETING LEADER DEALS WITH PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

Person is usually the first to speak on an issue, comments too frequently, and tends to dominate discussions

1. Target questions to other group members by name.
2. Wait for a pause, rephrase the person's statement, and quickly move on.
3. Interrupt tactfully with a focused question or summary.
4. Ask the person to be a recorder or a process observer.
5. Allow the group to cut the person off.
6. Tell the person they have made several contributions and you want to hear how other group members see this issue.
7. Suggest that everyone have a turn, or some other procedure that limits each group member's discussion time.
8. Use nonverbal signals, e.g., make no direct eye contact with the person or focus on another part of the room.
9. Talk to the person candidly about their behavior in private.
10. Do not assign a subgroup leadership role to this person.

Person does not participate freely in discussions

1. Be patient
2. Use a warm-up exercise, and give the person a major role in it.
3. Make eye contact with the person and ask the person direct questions on topics in which you know the person has expertise.
4. Involve the person in subgroup work, and ask them to report back.
5. Give the person a key role in the meeting.
6. Tell the person in private that the group really needs their input, and ask them if there is a reason they are not contributing.
7. Ask the person if you can help clarify the process, or if someone in the group can help clarify the issues for them.

Group members have jumped ahead to solutions and are clearly arguing for their own personal views.

1. Make sure the problem has been properly defined, in all of its dimensions.
2. Go back if necessary to make sure the group is following the steps and rules of the problem solving model or decision making process they agreed upon.
3. Ask them to list the advantages and disadvantages of each solution, including their own, or to review the criteria for evaluating solutions.

Group reaches an apparent impasse on a decision

1. Make sure everyone is participating.
2. Make sure they are following the steps of a systematic decision making process.
3. If recycling through the steps does not help, ask the group if they want to put this issue aside and work on a different issue.
4. Ask what they see as the consequences or alternatives if they make no decision on the issue in question.

Person often gets off track in their remarks and uses low-probability exceptions or far-fetched examples to make a point

1. Ask how often the example being used is likely to occur?
2. Ask the person in advance (pointing out time constraints) for their short version--say, twenty words or less.
3. When the person pauses for breath, suggest the need to get back to the agenda.
4. Consider making this person a recorder in order to limit their remarks.
5. Do not assign a subgroup leadership role to this person.

Person stakes out an initial position and is highly reluctant to budge or even consider other viable alternatives

1. Apply "hints" on the I-can-live-with-it nature of consensus building.
2. Confront the person with the facts that have been surfaced in the group discussion.
3. Enlist the support of the other group members.
4. Give the person a graceful way out with an alternative you think the person can accept.

Group members get into heated argument

1. Intervene with conflict resolution techniques, and then help the group refocus on where they are in the task.
2. Ask the arguers to take their dispute outside of the group meeting.

■ WHAT A FACILITATIVE MEETING LEADER DOES WHEN CONFLICT STALLS A MEETING

1. Recognize that some conflict is natural in groups and your role is to help participants channel it into creative problem solving.
2. Intervene to steer group members away from problematic behavior when interpersonal conflict becomes dysfunctional.
3. Help the group determine whether a disagreement is central and important, or peripheral and not important, to its progress.
4. When conflict arises, ask the group: "Does this issue need to be resolved here and now for us to reach our goal?"
5. Teach the group how to use proven problem-solving and decision-making tools and techniques to address conflict naturally, as part of their process.
6. When group members are buried in conflict, refocus them on their desired end result by asking, "What do we want the end result to be?" or "What is it we are trying to achieve?"
7. Try to bring hidden agendas out into the open. Make it acceptable to assert one's personal goals and desires, and even to try to have them met.
8. Make it unacceptable for hidden or open personal agendas to stop the progress of the group or keep the group from being as effective as it could be.
9. Help the group work toward a mutually agreeable solution that will satisfy as many of everyone's needs as possible.
10. If the group cannot find a mutually acceptable solution, urge them to "agree not to agree" for the time being, change topics for a while, and return (if necessary) to the original issue at a later time.
11. When conflict arises because some group members or the entire group have violated their agreed-upon ground rules, point this out.
12. Suggest that the group add to its original ground rules whatever is needed to help resolve future conflict.
13. Rely on the group's ground rules document for a voting procedure (if one has been established).
14. Take a break to allow the issue and options to settle; take up the issue when the group reconvenes or at their next meeting.
15. Help the group work toward a compromise solution, acknowledging that it might not be the best one.
16. Ask the group's leader or sponsor (if there is one) for a solution or decision (less desirable than other impasse-resolution strategies, but sometimes necessary to allow needed action to be taken).
17. Educate group members about their role in preventing, resolving, containing or minimizing counter-productive conflict.

■ WHAT THE PARTICIPANTS CAN DO WHEN CONFLICT STALLS THEIR MEETING

1. Keep the group's end goal in mind; help others do the same.
2. Consider others' views by listening actively, finding merit in them, and understanding their main points.
3. Restate the other person's viewpoint to show understanding.
4. Avoid defending your own view until you have fully understood others'.
5. Be willing to disagree openly with any member of the group.
6. State your own view clearly, firmly and without excessive emotion.
7. When interrupted, ask people politely to let you finish.
8. Explain the reasons behind your statements, questions and actions.
9. Use facts and logic to support your assertions.
10. Always invite questions and comments after stating your view.
11. Avoid excessive repetition of your ideas; let them stand on their own merit.
12. Avoid becoming overly invested in your own ideas, or taking it personally if the group decides to adopt another approach.
13. Offer alternatives rather than simply disagreeing with another approach.
14. Treat individual issues on their own merits, independent of other issues.
15. Communicate openly with other group members without unexpressed interests; be willing to share all relevant information with them.
16. Carefully consider the impact of your own words and actions on other group members; avoid talking down to or about them.
17. Remain unconditionally constructive, even when other group members do not.
18. Suggest a break to "cool off" whenever disagreement becomes volatile.
19. Test your own assumptions and inferences about other group members' thoughts and motives (*before* acting on them) by asking relevant questions.
20. Take promises to other group members seriously, initiate all reasonable steps to keep promises, and alert other group members explicitly and as far in advance as possible when unanticipated events or circumstances will make it impossible for you to honor prior promises.

REFERENCES

¹ Hackett, Donald, Ph.D. and Martin, Charles L., *Facilitation Skills for Team Leaders*, 1993, Crisp Publications, Inc., Menlo Park, CA, p. 8.