



Helping nonprofits and NGOs worldwide thrive in challenging times

Making meetings matter

Challenging times and lean budgets mean that the time you spend in a meeting matters more than ever. Don't take it for granted that your sessions are well run and engage everyone. Learning effective facilitation skills is an essential leadership tool. A strong facilitator has the ability to develop an effective meeting process and to set ground rules for the group. Consider the following:

Begin and end on time. It sends a signal that this is a critical session worthy of busy peoples' time.

Have a written agenda regardless of how comfortable or casual the group is with the topic.

Ask up front for your participants' full attention, including silencing all communications devices.

Keep the focus on the future. It is important to understand what has gotten the group to the point where they are, but it's probably more important to spend time looking ahead. If necessary, tell your group outright that this is not a time for airing complaints, blaming, recapping, etc.

Ensure that all are heard. Encourage everyone in the group to contribute and make sure everyone has a chance to speak. It is your job as facilitator to prevent a single person from dominating the conversation.

Speak in the first person and speak for yourself. Don't let the group speak about or for other people, but focus in on the person speaking in terms of "I think, I feel."

Be concise and ask others to be as well. Ask everyone try to make three precise and to-the-point comments rather than rambling on with lots of stories and wandering off the central topic.

Model exemplary listening (and good manners). Make sure everyone really listens to the person who is speaking rather than always thinking about what they are going to say next. Deal quickly but politely with side conversations, off-the-subject tangents, or interruptions.

Respect and encourage a wide range of perspectives. Make sure that everyone respects each other's opinions. Within the time constraints, encourage different points of view and perspectives.

Be the crew, not just the passengers, of the ship. Make sure everyone takes responsibility for the discussions and the decisions. No one at the meeting should be "just an observer."

Tune your radar to detect "groupthink" and unspoken (but real) objections to the plan.

Have courage and speak what is honest and truthful. Communication is built on not being afraid to say what you believe and feel, as long as the well-being of the group--and the goal--is preserved.

Make sure the next step--or meeting--is defined.

Give every opportunity for the agreements made to be reinforced. If a hallway conversation afterward immediately detracts from the agreement, you have somehow failed.